

False Fate

By MD1016

Part I: Cup of Oaths

Chapter 1 – Going It Alone

Ron looked down his outstretched arm, past the tip of his wand, and into the steely gray eyes of Draco Malfoy, who was threatening in a similar stance. Apparently the summer had not been kind to Malfoy, who was riddled with an assortment of bruises and gashes. His pale blond hair hung limp and dirty, his left eye was purple and swollen nearly shut, and when he snarled at Ron it was obvious that there was more than one tooth missing in his otherwise pristine orthodontia. The angry expression on his battered face told Ron he was as surprised to find himself at the end of a wand as Ron was.

"A bit under the weather?" Ron couldn't help but ask.

"Shut it, Weasel!"

"Right," Ron murmured. He didn't like the wild tinge of desperation in Malfoy's voice, the pitch of suppressed hysteria that hummed through the other boy. There was only one reason they were here, one reason why anyone would ever venture into this particular cave, at this particular time of night, and that meant Malfoy had found himself in serious trouble.

"Have you found it?" There was no mistaking to what Malfoy was referring. "Give it to me!"

"If I had it, I wouldn't be here chatting with you, now, would I?"

Malfoy's wand arm began to tremor under the strain of extension. "I need it. Give it to me!"

Ron had no doubt that he did need it. He could see the writhing tattoo peeking out from the cuff of Malfoy's filthy sleeve. The Dark Mark. A

skull eating a snake over and over. The sight left a queasy wobble in Ron's stomach. You-Know-Who owned Malfoy, body and soul.

"I don't have—" Before he could finish his sentence, Malfoy let an "Expelliarmus!" loose, and a green bolt shot from his wand to Ron before Ron even registered it was there. Struck, he whirled in the air like a rag doll, slammed bodily into the jagged ceiling, and then dropped the three meters to the ground.

With the wind knocked from him, Ron could barely move, barely focus on the towering, black-clad figure approaching. Barely register the movement behind his attacker in the dim, murky dark.

"You're weak, Weasley. Not fit for the wizarding world." Malfoy began to raise his wand again, and Ron closed his eyes against the pain he was sure would blast through him.

"Ron!"

She was there! It was impossible, but Hermione was there, her own wand raised and pointing to Malfoy's head.

"What're you doing here?" Ron gasped at her. She shouldn't be there with him. It didn't make sense.

The evil grin that slowly stretched across Malfoy's face sent a cold flood through Ron's veins. He was insane, Ron realized belatedly. You-Know-Who had driven Malfoy over the edge. With a steadiness and speed that seemed unnatural, Malfoy threw his wand arm up at Hermione and screamed, "Falsus amor FATUM!"

The pure white light that shot into Hermione lit the whole cave as if it were full day, and Ron watched in horror as his friend whimpered, clutched her chest, and then crumpled to the floor.

Air flowed into his lungs along with a rage Ron had never before known. He was off the floor and flying through the air, unable to think over the sound of his own furious scream. He made contact with Malfoy's bare neck and dug his fingers into the soft, cold flesh. The

two of them toppled, and Malfoy struggled to get out from under him while Ron demanded, "What did you do to her?"

Malfoy's face turned red, then purple as he clutched at his wand and tried to force words from his choked throat. When that didn't work he reached up to Ron's own neck with both hands and tried frantically to find purchase. But Ron was like a Berserker, more powerful in his passion, and there was nothing Malfoy could do to protect himself. As Malfoy's struggle weakened and the veins in his eyes began to burst, Ron, in a last fit of anger, slammed his head into the stone floor. Twice.

In its wake, the frenzy of the moment before left Ron disoriented. He still had trouble catching his breath. His mind hummed with an unpleasant vibration. His gaze fell on the Magi-o'-lantern he'd brought with him, still calmly glowing with its happy, carved face. Heat seemed to radiate from his chest and neck – from his whole body, really – but not from the body below him. Had he killed him? Had he killed Mal-

"Hermione!" His brain snapped into focus in an instant, and he leapt from his crouched position to the other lifeless form. She was on her side, her head bleeding onto the hard, dusty ground. He didn't know what to do. She wasn't supposed to be there. He'd specifically not told her what he was doing or where he was going, and she wasn't supposed to be there.

He said her name again, this time a whisper, and touched her cheek, but she didn't move. "No, no, no." He spoke the mantra that was already running through his brain. "No. Please."

By the time he'd managed to collect her in his arms and Apparate back to the Burrow, tears were streaming down his hot face. "Help," he gulped out at his mother, who met him at the door. The rest was a blur.

"And you're sure you can't remember the curse?" Lady Winkle asked grimly. She stood over him like a great white cloud in her healer robes. "It wasn't anything in the cross-hex family, was it?"

Ron shook his head and stared at his untied shoe. "I'd never heard it before."

His mother sat beside him on the bench, his father stood by Lady Winkle looking anxious, and Harry – Ron looked up at his friend – Harry sat by her bed. He'd come as soon as they'd called; arrived on his broom through the window, not even bothering to deal with the front door of St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. He looked as tired as Ron felt.

"She wasn't supposed to be there."

On her back in the narrow bed, Hermione lay as if sleeping, her head newly bandaged. But she wasn't sleeping, Lady Winkle had informed them. And it was going to be difficult to rouse her without knowing what had been done to her.

"These things can be trying," Lady Winkle was saying to Ron's father. "But I'm sure you understand how crucial it is for a proper diagnosis."

His father said something else, something in agreement, but Ron didn't hear him. His whole body ached, every inch of him miserable knowing that this was all his fault. That she never would've been there if it hadn't been for him. If only he hadn't concocted the scheme to help Harry in his battle with You-Know-Who.

"Why?" Harry demanded, and Ron realized belatedly that his friend had got up and faced him across the room. "Why would you two confront Malfoy without me?"

"I..." Ron struggled for words. "I didn't know he'd be there."

"Where, dear?" Molly asked, putting an encouraging hand to her son's shoulder.

He didn't want to tell them. Didn't want to admit what a dullard he'd been. But they were all looking at him, and Ron couldn't hide. "The Cave of Regret. I was trying to find the Cup of Oaths. I thought that Harry, well...it's hard to know who to trust these days, you know. Who's a Death Eater and who's not. And I thought if Harry had the

Cup of Oaths he could be sure. But Malfoy – I'm sure he wanted it, too. He said he needed it. The Cup can be used for the reverse, you know: to dissolve a magical oath. Like the Death Eater's oath that binds them to You-Know-Who." Ron shook his head. "Draco...he's gone mad."

"You should've told me," Harry said, his voice accusatory and low.

Ron bolted to his feet, on the defensive and angry for feeling that way. Yes, he knew it was his fault. He didn't need his best mate riding him about it. "So now I'm supposed to run everything by you? Can't a bloke think for himself anymore?"

"Now, now," Ron's dad counseled.

"Anyway, it wasn't supposed to happen like that, was it? I was just going to nip in, grab the Cup, and out again."

"Nip into the Cave of Regret?" his dad asked incredulously. "There's a reason that Cup is in there, son. It's protected in that cave. It's much too powerful for a boy of your age—"

"I'm a man!" Ron blasted out, a knee-jerk response. "Do boys worry that their friends will be killed by Death Eaters? Do boys live with the knowledge that in the near future they'll have to face Voldemort?" Boys don't kill, he added darkly to himself. And Ron had killed. The knowledge was like an ugly secret burning in his heart.

The use of the name took them all by surprise, and his father's shocked, red face drained into a pale, fierce one. "Some, it seems, do."

Beside him, Ron's mother stirred. "Come along, Arthur, the child's distraught. Leave Ron and Harry to sit with Hermione. You might remember something if you have a chance to calm a bit, yes?" she said to Ron, and stroked the back of his head.

Arthur gave a terse nod. Ron's parents left and Lady Winkle went back to tending her patient.

Harry sat down heavily.

"You're right," Ron admitted in a small voice. "I should've told you. I should've told her-" he pointed at their friend. "Then she could've told me how daft I am, and not to mettle with such nonsense, and tell me every bookie-thing she's ever read about people looking for the Cup."

"You...you didn't tell her?"

"She must've followed me," he said with a shrug. "Can't think how else she got there. Unless she's started to think like me..."

They exchanged dubious looks. "Don't suppose there's much danger of that," Harry said with a lop-sided grin. But the light moment vanished in an instant as they both gazed across to Hermione.

"Her parents will be here soon," Ron whispered. "What will I say to them?"

"You'll think of something," Harry assured him.

"Suppose I'll have to," Ron agreed.

The whole next day Ron and Harry stood vigil at her bedside, watching anxiously as Hermione grew more and more pale and the flesh around her eyes darkened with sickness. She was failing, that much was clear.

"We've got to do something," Ron insisted for the hundredth time.

"Dear, oh dear," Lady Winkled muttered over her charge. She had a cloudy crystal in one hand and a small bowl of water in the other. She looked up at Ron. "And you're sure you have no recollection of what curse was used? It was never a Fatum Curse, was it?"

A cold chill crawled slowly up Ron's spine. "Yeah, that's what he said!" Ron said the word Fatum to himself. "I think," he added, a little less sure.

Lady Winkle shook her head sadly. "Dear, oh dear."

"A Fate Curse?" Harry asked. "Why would Malfoy use one of those?"

"It worked, didn't it?" Ron snapped, gesturing to Hermione.

"The question isn't why, my dear, but which one. Must consult my tomes," she said, and headed out of the room.

"What's a Fate Curse?" Ron asked once they were alone. "And how do you know about them?"

Harry gave an exasperated groan that Hermione would've been proud of. "Because I did occasionally pay attention at Hogwarts. You never know when a spell will come in handy when you're fighting Voldemort."

"Yeah, OK," Ron said, chided into submission. "So what is it?"

"It's a curse that messes with your Fates. Particularly nasty because they're so hard to reverse without adverse effects. I didn't know they'd knock you out, though," he said, looking at the prone form in the bed. "Most of the Fate Curses have been banned for decades, but I don't think they've ever been listed as an Unforgivable. I only learned one. And I never used it," he added quickly. "Sisco Laus Fatum. It's supposed to make you completely untrustworthy, whether you want to be or not. Of course, she would know more. She's always backing us up, but it never seems we return the favor, does it? She counts on us to know things, to come up with the answers when she can't. Like now."

Ron swallowed at the lump that had formed in the back of his throat. "Harry," he said quietly, "I think...I think I killed him. Malfoy."

For a moment Harry didn't speak. Then he asked, "With magic?"

"No," Ron told him. "With my bare hands."

"Good," said Harry. "Then they'll never know it was you."

Somehow Ron had expected something more, some admonishment or blame or fear or something more than quiet approval. But they weren't boys anymore, and men killed when they had to. He didn't like how that made him feel. He began to shiver a little, and did his best to hide it from Harry.

"Falsus Amor Fatum," Lady Winkle said as she breezed back into the room. "Tell me, lad, was that what you heard?"

"Could be," Ron said, though he was far from sure.

"She's a Muggle-born, is she?"

Both Ron and Harry nodded.

"Falsus Amor was never intended for use on anyone of mixed parentage. Meant to help keep the lines pure, or some such nonsense."

"So, you can fix her?" Ron asked, hopeful for the first time since he'd left the cave. "You know what it is, right?"

"I'm afraid it's not that simple. The curse has put this child into a suspended trance, and the only thing that will bring her out of it is a kiss."

"Wha'?" said Ron, shocked beyond proper speech.

"That's it? Right, then," Harry said, his tone lighter than it had been in days. He clapped Ron on the shoulder and said, "Give it a go, old chap."

"Just a minute, young man," Lady Winkle said, somber as ever. "Fate Curses are very dangerous to meddle with. Whoever kisses this girl will instantly and irrevocably become her True Love, and he hers."

"True Love?" Ron echoed dubiously. "Malfoy shot her with a True Love Spell? That doesn't sound right. Does that sound right to you, Harry?"

"Hang on," Harry told him. "If Ron kisses her and becomes her True Love, and she his, then what happens to their real True Loves out there?"

Lady Winkle shrugged unsympathetically. "Do without, I suppose. Mixing with the Fates causes a web of problems that the caster couldn't possibly anticipate. That's why they're not to be cast." Then she added, "Why someone would teach a Fate Curse to a teenager is beyond me."

"But True Love is just a myth, isn't it?" Ron insisted. "Just a load of rubbish to make girls happy."

"Oh, no, dear. True Love, while very rare, is most certainly real." She looked thoughtfully at Hermione. "This might actually be the only chance this child has at finding True Love. Or," she said with a causal shrug, "she may lose her True Love forever, to be replaced by an imposter. Either way, someone has to kiss her soon because the shelf life for a curse like this on a Muggle-born is about a day, and after that it generally snuffs them out completely."

"Snuffs them out completely?" Ron repeated, this time disgusted. "And you call yourself a professional!"

She ignored him. "So, who's it going to be?"

Both Harry and Ron glanced from Hermione to each other, and then back to their unconscious friend. "We can't let her die," Ron said plaintively.

"No," Harry agreed. "I'll do it. Can't be much chance of me having a True Love out there anyway."

"What about Ginny?" Ron demanded, indignant. "I assumed that when you started snogging my baby sister—"

"What? That it was True Love? I thought you didn't believe in it!"

"Still," Ron said, hurt and not quite sure why.

They turned back to the figure in the bed. She was hardly breathing.

"Right, then," Harry exhaled. "Sorry to have to do this to you." He leaned down over the bed, over the still face of their friend, hesitant and uncertain.

"That's it, dear. Full on the lips. Give it a go!" Lady Winkle was a little more excited about the turn of events than Ron was comfortable with. Harry seemed to feel the same; he glared at the doctor from the corner of his eye. "And when you kiss her, it might be best to think of something happy. Like sweeties or laughing babies – you're sure to have plenty of those in no time!"

Harry and Hermione, Ron thought. Harry and Hermione having a baby. And then, Harry doing to Hermione what it took to make a baby! Heat flushed up Ron's neck, and his stomach dropped out from under his pounding heart. No, his mind rebelled. "NO!" he screamed, and shoved Harry back by the shoulder.

Caught off balance, Harry landed hard on the floor. "Ron," Harry began as he turned and looked up at him. "Calm down—"

"No," Ron said again. He didn't want to hear it.

On his side on the ground, Harry straightened his glasses. "You kiss her, then," Harry told him.

"Why does it have to be this way?" Ron asked, all at once tired and scared. "It shouldn't happen like this."

"Maybe it should," Harry said. "Maybe it's Fate. I don't know. Just do it."

Ron rolled his eyes. He held out a hand and helped his friend up, and once again they were staring down at Hermione. If possible, she looked even more delicate. Ron shook in earnest, tremors starting in at the base of his back and working themselves up and over his shoulders. There were all kinds of emotions boiling in his chest, in his belly – things he didn't understand, and what's more, didn't really

want to. True Love was nonsense. He had nothing to be scared of, he told himself. It's the kiss that breaks the curse. Just a simple...

The instant his lips touched hers he was socked so hard in the mouth that he was thrown backwards and off his feet. He landed on the other side of the room, against the wall, which now sported a large, person-shaped dent in the plaster. "What the...?" He touched a finger to his swollen lips and they came away bloody.

"Oh, dear," Lady Winkle erupted again. "Oh, dear; oh, dear; oh, dear—"

Ron could see from his improvised seat that Hermione's lips, while not bloody, were also swollen, and glowing ever-so-slightly with the faint hint of residual magic.

"Did it work?" asked Harry.

"I'm fine," Ron volunteered, getting to his feet, "in case anyone's concerned."

"Oh, no," Lady Winkle said, and then tsked her disapproval. "It seems you," she said, pointing an accusatory finger at Ron, "are not a suitable candidate to break this particular curse."

"Why not? What's wrong with me?"

Lady Winkle guffawed. "I would've thought that obvious! It seems you are her True Love, dear. Therefore, the spell cannot substitute you for you."

"I'm...? What...?" Ron was completely baffled by this new twist. "I am not! Harry, tell her!" Harry was staring at him. "What are you looking at?" Ron wiped at the blood on his lower lip with the back of his hand.

"If he's her True Love, and he can't break the spell," Harry asked as he turned back to Lady Winkle, "then if I kiss her, he'll lose his True Love. Because of me."

"He's going to lose her anyway, dear," she said quite honestly. "One way or the other."

"This is a load of rubbish," Ron cut in. "Kiss her, Harry, and get this whole mess over with."

"No," Harry told him with a shake of his head.

"What? Why not? You were going to a minute ago."

"I knew you'd stop me," Harry countered.

"You knew no such thing," Ron admonished. "I didn't even know."

"That I believe," Harry said, more under his breath than to anyone in particular. "Just...Lady Winkle, there must be another way—"

"Afraid not, dear. Now pucker up, there's a good lad. One good, solid kiss and everyone's right as rain."

"Not him," Harry said.

"Yes, well, there's always someone, isn't there? Now, kiss the girl."

"Kiss her," Ron urged.

Harry shook his head, and continued to shake it as he leaned over the object of their argument. Hermione didn't move, didn't protest, and Ron found an irrational part of him had expected she might. Harry took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and the second – the very instant – that Harry touched his lips to hers, something deep inside Ron shattered, wholly and completely.

Ron woke with his hand still clutching his chest. Something was wrong. He lolled his head to the side and found Hermione, with her eyes open and a weak smile gracing her swollen mouth. Her hand was clutched in Harry's, who sat on the side of her bed, and her fingers were against his chest. Harry had tears in his eyes, and Hermione was telling him not to worry.

"I'm fine," she assured. "I'll be up and about in no time."

"It's not that," he whispered when his voice broke on the words. "I just never thought...never knew..." He turned and looked at Ron, and a drop rolled down the side of his cheek. "I had no idea it would feel this way. I've never known anything like it."

Ron turned his head away. He couldn't look at them, either of them. A tear of his own escaped the corner of his eye and pooled in his ear. He'd never felt this way, either, and he didn't understand it. It was a hollowness that penetrated down to his very soul; an emptiness he never knew could exist.

"Thank you," Harry whispered to him.

For the first time in his life, Ron felt completely and utterly alone.

End of Chapter 1

Part I: Cup of Oaths

Chapter 2 – His For The Taking

It was odd going back to the Burrow and feeling completely disjointed from his surroundings. Ron knew every inch of his childhood home, and yet everything seemed somehow new to him: different and cold. Even his bed, and while he fit perfectly in the Ron-sized depression in the middle, it felt foreign. Nothing had changed, really, and yet, subtly, everything had.

Ron kicked off his shoes and stared through the floral print curtains to the white light of outdoors.

After a while, there came a light knock from his bedroom door. His mother poked her head in.

"All right, dear?"

"Couldn't be better," he mumbled, not bothering to look at her.

"Good, good," she muttered. "Nice that Hermione is doing so much better, isn't it, dear? She should be going home today, yes?"

"I guess."

"Well, that's good." Molly pushed open the door a little further and stepped inside. "Thought you'd want to be there with her when she's discharged, but no matter. I'm sure her parents will tend to her. I'll be taking Ginny to get her school books this morning. Ron, sweet, are you absolutely sure you don't want to go to Hogwarts this year? It'll be your last year—"

"We've already talked about this, Mum. Harry needs us."

"Yes, yes," she said sadly, not really agreeing at all. "But you boys always find trouble without looking for it. And now...it makes a mother worry."

"It's Hermione, too. Not just me and Harry. And the Order."

"Hermione, yes, well, I used to think she was the sensible one in the group, but now I'm starting to think you and Harry have been a terrible influence on her, affected her judgment-"

"There's nothing wrong with Hermione's judgment!" Ron insisted.

Molly began to pick up socks from the floor, then dusted a couple of knickknacks with them. "You all right? You haven't been yourself since you came back from hospital."

"Yeah. Fine."

"I could make you some Jumble Jolts, if you like. Would you like that, dear? Because you seem so down? Hmm? Your father always perks up with a handful of Jumble Jolts. It's a good thing he's mostly a happy man or I'd be making pots of them a day, and he'd likely be the biggest wizard in the Ministry. Not real good for the waistline, you know, and your father is getting a bit on in years, as are we all, I suppose, and the middles do tend to get a little thicker every year. Not that I'd expect you'd say that to his face, now. Your father's still a very handsome man, as are all my men folk." She rustled his fringe. He turned his head away. He hated it when she treated him like a child. If she knew what he'd done to Draco...that he was a murderer...

"All right," she said quietly, and then folded the three mismatched socks in her hands into one large ball. For a moment she paused, watching him, and Ron thought maybe he'd have to offer some further assurance. She sighed and went to the door, dropping the sock ball back onto the floor. "Well, then," she said.

That was all there was to say, wasn't it? Well, then.

"Mum," he said to stop her. "Do you believe in...True Love?"

This time he turned his head and saw the shock written plainly across her face. He felt his cheeks darken, and he looked down to his stocking feet and the big hole over his second toe.

"Yes," she said slowly. "Of course. Why do you ask?"

Ron shrugged and looked back out the curtained window. "Just wondering."

"About what, dear?"

"About True Love and if it really exists."

"Oh, it does, for sure. But you don't need to worry about that. It's very rare, you know."

"Huh." No worries here, he thought darkly. Odd that something he never believed in, never really considered, could be so totally bereft from his life. Had he really Loved her when most of the time she'd rankled him? That never was Love, was it?

"You and Dad, though. You've got it. True Love?"

"Oh, no." She chuckled a little and sat herself on the bed beside him. "Not us. Of course, I love your father to the very bottom of my heart," she added quickly. "Would never want any other man in my life – to be the father of my children. But no, we've not got True Love."

"So, what's the difference?" Ron asked.

"Well..." She thought for a moment. "The Fates, I suppose. They take all the guesswork out of it, which is good for some, I suppose, because then there's no doubt. But they also take the choice away, too, which, if you ask me, is part of the fun."

"So, if you have a True Love then you have to get married to that person and have babies and stuff?"

"Oh, no," she assured. "The Fates don't take away free will. One can choose not to marry their True Love."

"You said the Fates do take away the choice."

"I meant of who you Love. When one has a True Love it's that person, and that person only, no ifs, ands, or buts – even if they're reprehensible and make you gag with the stink of it. So, of course, one can chose not to marry their True Love, but there will never be another. Love, that is," she added just to be sure he was following.

"So...." He cleared his throat and screwed up the courage to ask, "So if, hypothetically, something were to happen to one's True Love – say they died or something – then one would never, ever fall in love? Or know love...or anything?"

"That's how I understand it to be," his mum said with a nod. "Course, there's more reasons to get married than love, you know. Many more. But you're young, and you've got plenty of time. Don't fash yourself into a bother over something that's very unlikely. And Ronnie, do think about coming with us to Diagon Alley. One more year at Hogwarts, even without Dumbledore there, would be good for you boys. And Hermione, too."

"Hmph," he disagreed.

"Now that she's feeling better, you could invite her over for dinner one night, if you want," she said very casually, but with a smile on her face that was anything but. "And I'm sorry that I suggested she might not be as sensible as she once was. That was unfair of me. She's a perfectly lovely girl."

"Hmph," he agreed.

"All right, dear." With that, she stood and kissed Ron on the forehead. She left the door slightly ajar.

Huh. So Ron would never fall in love. Big-effing-deal. That didn't mean he couldn't have girlfriends. Of course, they would never love him, either. That one stung just a little bit more. Whatever, he told himself. Love was for girls and silly people, and he was neither.

They sat around the old oak table in Harry's large basement kitchen – what used to be Harry's godfather Sirius Black's kitchen – eating fish and chips take-away and drinking orange Shastas. Ron loved Muggle food, and it was a rare treat when he got to indulge. Hermione, of

course, was picking all the crisp from her fish, wasting it, Ron felt, but he didn't say anything. It was weird for him not to, that was just the sort of thing he'd usually gripe at her about – but now he didn't feel...comfortable? Was that the word?

Of course, Ron had polished off his portion and started on the extra that Harry had bought. He'd grown a good 15 centimeters over the last year and, thanks to Quidditch, had filled out through the shoulders and chest. His appetite had grown as well – and Ron had been a good eater to begin with. Good ol' Harry, though, always had enough food for a bloke.

"So, Harry," Hermione spoke first, having only touched a quarter of her plate. "What's the master plan? I'd like to do as much research up front as possible. I've my new library card to the Archives of Magical Tomes, next door to Gringotts, and Professor McGonagall said that I was welcome to use the Hogwarts library whenever." She beamed with excitement, and Ron found himself not rolling his eyes as usual. Weird indeed.

"I don't know, really. The Order won't meet here until the night after next, and I suppose we'll have to do some regrouping. We've got to find Voldemort and figure out who's who in the Death Eater ranks so we know who to watch out for." He turned to Ron. "You were right. The Cup of Oaths would've been quite helpful."

Ron squeezed grease from a chip, and it dripped down the underside of his thumb. "Yeah."

"So, I've been putting some work into this old house," Harry said, changing the subject completely. "I've hired an archimagitect to come in and make some changes, make the place more livable, less dark and gloomy. I couldn't bear to live in it like it was. He's moved some of the rooms around, added new paint and wall paper, relocated some of the portraits so they're less intrusive, that sort of thing. I thought it would be best if we're going to continue to use this place for Order Headquarters. And I had him put in a War Room."

He paused, fidgeted with his sleeve. "So, anyway, uh, listen. I was thinking...we might have a lot of late-night meetings or need to work at odd hours...and this is a really big place for just me. And if you wanted, the two of you could move in. If you want."

"That would be brilliant," Ron said quickly, happy at the prospect of leaving the Burrow. It was easier sitting there with the two of them close than it had been in his old room, and even if it wasn't quite like old times, if he didn't think too hard it was similar. The gaping hole in his soul didn't seem quite so jagged when his friends were close.

"I've got to get a job, though," Ron told them. "It's the only way my folks are letting me out of seventh year at Hogwarts. Dad said if I'm old enough to make it on my own, then I best make it on my own."

"What about you, Hermione?" The way Harry said her name stopped Ron's heart in his chest.

"I don't know. Mum and Dad are pretty upset over me leaving school a year early. They said they were disappointed in me," she added in a small voice. For Hermione, that must've been devastating. "And because of what happened, well, their confidence in my ability to take care of myself is somewhat diminished." She pushed a bit of fish crisp around on her plate, frowning. "I suppose, though, if I found work as well, maybe something Muggle and ordinary..."

Her disappointment sparked something in Ron, something small and fleeting, but he knew it was there. Absently rubbing that empty spot on his chest, he said, "That doesn't sound like you. Sounds boring."

"Thank you, Ron," she said with a little smile. "But it may have to be, at least for a while. I don't know. I just feel very queer about not being at school with everyone else. Not that I don't want to be here, because I do—" This time she offered Harry the smile. "I don't know..."

"I think we all feel the same," Harry offered. Ron gave a sarcastic snort, but Harry continued. "Honestly, I can't thank the both of you enough. I realize what you're giving up for me—"

"Oh, stop, Harry, before this meal dissolves into a sob fest," Ron quipped.

"Honestly, Ron," Hermione snipped. Whenever the moment gets the least bit sensitive you make a remark like that!"

"Like what?" he asked defensively.

"Like a child."

"I'm not a child," he insisted, his voice low with anger.

"Then don't act like one," she countered.

"I'm not!"

His reaction was so vehement it stunned her into silence. So much for feeling better here than at home, Ron thought.

"I'm not," he muttered again, and Hermione took that as a cue to stuff a whole chip in her mouth at once.

It was Harry who finally cleared his throat and said, "We're going to be OK," though he said it without looking at either of them. Hermione nodded solemnly, but Ron got the distinct impression that she hadn't a clue as to what Harry was really talking about.

Two days later Ron left his childhood home and moved into number 12 Grimmauld Place, also known by a select few as Headquarters for the Order of the Phoenix. He had his own room on the second floor in the large family manse, with an over-large, over-stuffed bed, an armoire, and a dressing table with a large mirror named Lucy. His things lay in a heap in the middle of the room, still bound in the carpet bags and scarred leather cases he'd packed them in. Unpacking was never a pleasant process, and the job before him seemed overwhelming. So, he decided to look in on Hermione and see how she was getting along.

Her room was down the hall and opposite Harry's. The door was wide open when Ron knocked.

"Hullo—" Ron began, and then stopped short. What had formerly been a spare bedroom was now transformed into something that resembled a resale shop for mountains of books. Dark wood shelves lined the four walls, and a four-poster bed was wedged inside one of them. Every shelf was crammed with books: big and small, leather-bound magical tomes and Muggle readers. A double-wide reading chair sat angled in one corner, and the table beside it was actually another smaller bookshelf that revolved on its own. Crookshanks lay curled up on a small stack on the bed, seemingly content in his new surroundings, as was Hermione, who was already nose deep in a fuzzy purple book.

She looked up at his knock and smiled. "Ron! You've made it."

"Uh...not to be critical, but is all this really necessary? Where'd you put your clothes?"

"I've a Murphy closet," she told him, then pulled a cord from under her bed in demonstration. Out rolled a flat box that instantly inflated into a massive closet. She swung one of the doors open, and inside hung clothes and shoes above three wide drawers. "As long as I don't mess up and put something magical in there, it'll hold just about anything and keep them pressed and smelling fresh."

"Right. Charlie's got one of those," he said, completely unimpressed. His eldest brother traveled a great deal for work, and therefore needed one.

Hermione packed her closet away. "I wanted to be sure to bring everything we might need. Mum and Dad still aren't thrilled with me living here, and I'd like to avoid unnecessary trips back to the house. I don't want them to think I can't handle this." She looked up at him at that and cocked her head to one side. "We can handle this, can't we, Ron? We're not in over our heads, are we?"

He took a deep breath and let the deep dark of her brown eyes bore into him. "You mean the Order, don't you?"

"And the Death Eaters, and Voldemort, and not finishing Hogwarts. Nothing seems to have gone as planned, has it?"

"No." He glanced over his shoulder at Harry's bedroom door.

"I'm sure we'll be good," she said, now suddenly sounding confident. "Together we always manage. You're not..." She turned to him. "Ron, tell me you're not going to go out on your own again. Promise me you won't do anything that foolish."

"What, are you my mum now?"

"Promise me," she insisted.

"Would you ask Harry the same?" he tested.

She paused and picked up the discarded purple book. "There are some things Harry has to do on his own," she remarked. "But my point is that it's not up to you or me to fight Harry's fight for him. And I worry, in the end, that's what it will be. Harry's fight. Oh, Ron." Her face crumpled, and Ron's stomach lurched. "Why did it have to be Harry?"

And somewhere, buried deep in his chest, Ron felt another little part of him wink out of existence without so much as a whiff of smoke.

With a hand clutching the front of his shirt, Ron backed out of the room. "I've got...to unpack," he said. A lame excuse.

She didn't even seem to notice. Hermione nodded, almost as an afterthought, as she turned to one of the expansive bookshelves and began again to search.

Tonks sat on a cushion by the roaring fireplace in the drawing room, a plate of food on one knee and a mug of Zombini's Dark Ale on the other. Her hair, Ron noted, was a blazing fuchsia and bouncing in ringlets even when her head wasn't moving. Across from her, in the wingback chair, Lupin looked just as happy, if less colorful. He sipped a cup of tea and alternated between smiling at Tonks and laughing at a story Shacklebolt was telling the group that involved Ron's father,

the same Zombini's Ale, and something called handcuffs, which Ron could only assume were some sort of Muggle glove fashion.

"My younger years, I assure you all," Ron's dad said with a laugh, enjoying the merriment as much as the rest of the room. "And if a word of this gets back to Molly—"

"Molly? She's the one who told me, old man!" Shacklebolt erupted, and the room followed in gales of laughter. Even Harry and Hermione were laughing, though granted their Muggle backgrounds probably helped translate the punch line a bit.

Not that Ron was really listening in any case. He was waffling between the roast beef on the end of his fork and the complete misery that his life had become. The worst part, he decided, was that he couldn't talk to Harry about it – his best friend, who, Ron grimly noted, was quite enjoying the latest turn of events. Well, enjoying might not be honest, but Harry was definitely not hating life like Ron was. But then, when Ron saw a genuine laugh spill from Hermione and considered the alternative – her in that hospital bed, barely alive... The war of emotions was difficult to keep a lid on, and Ron found himself fighting the urge to leap up screaming and throw himself against the nearest wall.

That was part of being a man, wasn't it? Denying one's self. Stiff upper lip and all that? Or was it just part of being Ron Weasley? Destined by a twist of Fate to be a friend to greatness, but never to know it himself? Or, he considered, was Love really that great? Maybe he was better off. Maybe he didn't really care at all. Girls were an illusive, backwards gender, and Hermione was certainly a girl.

Fine. Good. Let Harry have her, he thought. Ron didn't need the hassle.

He might've been tempted to convince himself of that, too, if it weren't for the complete emptiness he carried with him now.

"...And while you're doing that," Lupin continued, with a nod towards Ron's dad, "we'll work with our newest recruits. Between Moody and

me, I'm sure we can cover your sadly lacking Defense Against the Dark Arts education."

Had the meeting started? Ron looked around and all eyes were on Lupin in his chair. Dutifully, Ron deposited his plate on the small antique lamp table, but then decided he probably wouldn't have anything useful to add and picked it up again. No one would care if he kept eating. They'd probably be relieved because it meant he was less likely to say something stupid.

Moody stood against the wall with his arms crossed and his mad, bewitched eye sizing up the room. The eye landed and stayed fixed for a moment on Ron and his heap of potatoes, as if the odd wizard knew Ron hadn't been listening and didn't feel the least bit guilty about it. "We've got our work cut out for us," Moody grumbled.

"Professor," Hermione cut in, looking eager as ever. "I've been thinking about the Cup of Oaths, and I'm quite sure that with a proper plan—"

"Out of the question," Lupin cut her off, his tone more strict and sharp than Ron had ever heard it. He glanced over at Hermione, who shrank back a little on her footstool.

"We understand the three of you have made the choice to be here among us," Ron's dad continued for him, every bit as serious as Lupin had been. "And even though I disagree with that choice, we all respect the spirit in which it was made – which, quite plainly, is why you are allowed to be here. Don't do anything to make us regret that."

"No," Hermione said, and tried to quickly mend the moment. "I only meant that the Cup..."

"There will be no wild attempts or heroic efforts," Lupin lectured. "The Cup will stay where it is: protected and out of harm's way. Off limits."

"Now," he said with a fresh breath, "you may not be at Hogwarts, but you are most certainly continuing your education. We expect you, Harry and Ron, to get your Apparition licenses. None of you are any

use to us unless you know what you're doing and can do it well. Is this understood?"

The three of them nodded.

"There are rules," Moody said, his voice almost growling. "And you will follow each and every one of them."

"Rule number one," Ron's dad chimed in. "Curfew is at nine o'clock. Inside this house, without fail."

"Rule number two," said Tonks, "no guests. Period."

"Wait a minute," Harry began, "we've reached majority—"

Lupin didn't let him get in another word. "Rule three: all advanced magic is to be practiced only under supervision, regardless of how many books might have been read on the subject."

"Rule four: no secrets. It's not the three of you against the rest of us."

"It feels like the rest of you against the three of us," Ron quipped in protest. Or me against the world, he thought. Certainly not the three of them together, in any case. No, not anymore.

"If we get even a whiff of any of you going out on your own to do something dangerous or foolish," Arthur told them, his face pinched and bloodless, "then your involvement in the Order will be re-evaluated."

"The work we do here is serious and grave," Lupin said. "You must understand this."

"I do," Harry whispered. Then: "We do."

"We'll not let you down, Professor," Hermione added.

"That's what we needed to hear," Tonks said, smiling.

"Tomorrow, then. Six p.m. We'll begin in the dining room," Lupin announced. "And Hermione—"

"Yes, Professor?"

"My name is Remus. I'm not your professor any longer."

Not children, and yet, not quite trusted to be adults. That's what the curfew was about, Ron was certain. Old enough to kill, but not to have a friend over for a pint.

It wasn't just the insides of Ron that felt wrong; everything around him seemed at odds as well. How was it that no one else seemed to notice? By the food, Shacklebolt, Tonks, and Ron's father began to chat once again over their laden plates while Lupin sat quietly sipping his tea.

None of them even considered Harry and Hermione sitting together near the fire, voices low and faces playful. No one saw Harry absently catch a stray strand of her hair and re-tuck it behind her ear, or the resulting small shiver that wiggled through her narrow shoulders. No one but Ron, who thought his head might explode.

Ron's first morning as a resident at number 12 Grimmauld Place began with a scream, a flash of orange, and a hammering heart. Crookshanks stared down at Ron from the headboard of the bed, gold eyes darting from Ron's face to his foot that had kicked free from the blankets at the bottom of the bed. Then, with another piercing shriek, the cat launched itself the length of the bed and landed – claws extended – on Ron's shin. This time Ron screamed, too.

Hermione pushed the door open just as Crookshanks flew across the room, Ron having kicked it there.

"What have you done?" she demanded, and then went to Crookshanks's aid. It scurried under the armoire, hissing and refusing to come out. "Poor, fluffy kitty. Did the mean old Ron hurt you?"

"Me hurt it?" Ron asked incredulous. "I'm likely to lose the leg thanks to that flea bag!"

"He's a him, Ron, and Crookshanks could never hurt a fly."

"The blood on my leg says he could."

Hermione flipped her hair over one shoulder and scowled at him.
"Why do you hate cats?"

"I don't. Only the cats that attack me first thing in the morning! That thing is mental, I tell you. Couldn't it tell that my toes are attached to the rest of me?"

She ignored him, and her hair fell into place, hiding her expression from him. "Come on, Crookshanks. There's a good kitty. I'll find you a nice piece of fish if you come out from under there."

With Hermione on her knees, Ron got a nice view of her rear. But it was the milky flesh at the small of her back, peeking out just above the waist of her jeans, that sent a bolt from his heart straight down between his legs. Startled, Ron sat up straight in the bed and clutched two fists full of blankets to cover this newest predicament.

"Ron, apologize," Hermione insisted, oblivious to his current state of distress. "He's got his feelings hurt, and he won't come out until you apologize."

"Sorry," Ron said quickly. Anything to placate her and get her out of there. His voice cracked, and she turned to him.

"You all right, Ron? You don't look so good."

"Fine!"

She eyed him. "Are you sure?" With an intent look on her face, Hermione stood and began to walk towards him.

Ron panicked. "Get out!"

Her eyes went wide. She hesitated. "What?"

"Out!" he repeated. "Get out!"

Her face dropped and then went completely blank. "Fine," she said on an exhale. She turned on her heel and stomped out of the room.

Ron closed his eyes in relief and then peeked down under the covers. "Great," he muttered. "This is bloody insane."

Ron left the house without breakfast that morning, wanting to avoid accidentally running into Hermione again so soon after he yelled at her. A little time away, he decided, would do him a world of good. And besides, he was a man on a mission.

First stop: Ministry of Magic. Ron waited over an hour to speak to a secretary of a secretary to the Secretary of Unemployed Magical Persons and to fill out a parchment on his marketable skills, only to be told by that secretary's secretary that there were no positions currently open for a person of his skill set. A not-so-subtle suggestion was made to go back to school, as he had a number of O.W.L.s under his belt and they'd great need for wizards with N.E.W.T.s at the moment in the Department of Magical Games and Sports. For a long moment Ron fancied himself a Quidditch expert in that Department, and then he was asked to step to the side so the next applicant could be turned down as well.

His second stop was Gringotts, the wizard's bank, where Ron had hopes that someone might need a clerk who could reach the high shelves, but they turned him away, apparently smelling the lack of money about him and thus not trusting him inside their establishment. The third time he was turned down was at the Leaky Cauldron for his inability to cook, clean, or mix drinks. Then it was The Three Hags' Robes 'n' Things and his lack of fashion sense, Nostradamus Nights because he couldn't label any of the constellations or actually divine the future, and lastly The Witchy Woman simply because he wasn't one.

At the end of the day, Ron shuffled home, head hung low, hungry, still unemployed and without any prospects. He found Harry and Hermione in the kitchen at the long, dark, wooden table, sitting side by side on the bench, bent over an enormous book that looked to be

centuries old. Were they sitting closer than usual? Ron couldn't decide. Maybe it was the arched ceiling that made them seem closer.

"There you are," Hermione said pointedly, but a small smile softened her face. "Any luck?"

"Nah. You?"

"Yes! I met with the woman who runs the flower shop two streets over. She's already got somebody in mind, but they can't start for weeks, and she needs a girl right away. I start tomorrow morning!"

"A flower store? You mean where they sell flowers? Not books?"

She scowled at him, but didn't bother with a rejoinder.

To break the tension, Harry shoved the book across the table at him and pointed to the sketch on the page that made to bite at his finger. "Sputter bugs. Heard of them?" The grouchy looking image seemed more an imp than a bug.

"Supposed to be nasty little things, aren't they? I've never actually seen one, but Percy said he knew a fellow with an infestation. Terribly hard to get rid of, they are, even if there's only one. Don't they live in your ears or something?"

Hermione quoted from memory: "The Sputter Bug, or *Mussito nocere*, is a small parasite resembling a tickle-fairy that lives within the first several layers of skin just behind the ear, existing primarily on blood and emotional energy and excreting the host's innermost thoughts to anyone in the immediate vicinity, particularly if those thoughts are about that person in the immediate vicinity."

Ron wondered how she was able to do that so bloody well. "Don't tell me we've got one," he pleaded. The last thing he needed was his emotional crisis announced to the world.

"What do you think might happen if a few sputter bugs got loose in the homes of some of the families we know are Death Eaters?" Hermione coyly asked, a knowing grin on her face.

"You're wicked!" Ron exclaimed, all smiles himself. The mischievous side of Hermione was exciting, and Ron always got a thrill when she let it out. "Do you have some?"

"It just so happens Hagrid has half a dozen for his Care of Magical Creatures class, but the new Headmistress forbade him to even let them out of their jars, and he's looking for a new home for them," Harry told him. "And I thought we might know of a few homes that could use a sputter bug or two."

"You saw Hagrid today?" Ron was both jealous and excited. "How's he doing?"

"All right," Harry said with a heavy sigh. "Hogwarts just isn't the same. I popped in for a spot of tea, and you could see the toll changing Headmasters has taken. They've had to find a new Potions teacher as well, and everyone is on edge because no one is sure about allegiances anymore. They've taken to short-sleeved robes just to be sure people aren't wearing the Dark Mark in secret. Don't know what they're going to do when the weather turns."

"Anyway, the Sputter Bugs were just a thought," Hermione interjected. "We'll have to run them by Lupin and Moody tonight."

"Are we really doing that?" Ron asked. "Following those rules?"

Hermione gave an exaggerated sigh. "Ron, you heard what they said—"

"It just doesn't seem our way, is all I'm saying," he said quickly. "Curfew? No visitors? It's like they don't trust us."

"I think that's the idea," Harry said with a smirk.

"We're not children anymore." Ron huffed and crossed his arms. "We didn't have this much hand-holding as first years."

Hermione considered him from the corner of her eye. "You have to admit that times have changed since then, and not for the better. And I, for one, would like to avoid hospital beds for a while."

Ron caught a fleeting look flash across Harry's face. Alarm, was it? Concern? A twist in Ron's gut forced him to look anywhere but at his friends. His eyes landed on the tray of food at the far end of the table. "What's for supper, then?"

"Cold," Harry told him. "I made up some soup, but couldn't figure out how to cook it."

"Well, is there anything else to eat?" His stomach rumbled at the thought of not being filled in a timely manner. "Fish and chips?"

"Salad," Hermione said, once again lost in her book. Ron looked over at the worktop to the lonely bowl and its sad green contents.

Salad wasn't a meal. Salad was the tease before the meal. No red-blooded Englishman, magical or otherwise, should be expected to sustain himself of salad. "Can't we just heat up the soup or something? Make a roast?" Ron asked, now feeling faint at the prospect of salad.

"Do you know how to work that thing?" Harry pointed to the behemoth cast iron stove that took up most of the back wall of the kitchen.

"Are you asking if I can cook?" Ron was dubious.

"There aren't any knobs," Harry told him. "We couldn't figure out how it worked."

"Knobs? Are you mental? It's a wizard's stove. What would you need knobs for? Just bewitch it into cooking for you."

"Funny how we didn't cover that at Hogwarts," Hermione said. "You'd think they'd have some kind of Wizard Studies class, you know, for those of us who grew up in Muggle households."

Ron rolled his eyes. "Who doesn't know how to work a stove?" he grumbled. "It's not like you have to cook or anything. Just heat the bloody soup up, for crying out loud!"

"If it's so easy," Hermione snapped, "then you do it!"

"Fine!" he snapped back, and snatched the cold stew from off the table. "Now I'm the housewife. Great. I move out of my mum's house to become my mum. Lovely. Bloody lovely."

Supper was more of the same; Harry and Hermione remained unhelpful and indifferent to Ron's mood, and Ron continued to hate the world around him. The soup turned out salty and smoky (it burned to the bottom of the cauldron), and so Ron, Harry, and Hermione ended up eating mostly salad.

As a result, when Mad-Eye Moody showed up, Ron's demeanor had hit an all-time low, and therefore he was only half-listening to the lecture Moody was giving on friendship and loyalty and trust.

"How much do you trust him?" Moody was asking. The long pause told Ron the wizard was talking to him. "I said" – Moody leaned in closer, his mechanical eye focusing in on Ron – "how much do you trust him?"

"Him?" Ron asked, and motioned to Harry with his chin. "Well enough, I reckon."

"Well enough?" Hermione asked, dramatically critical. "Ron, you're supposed to say you trust him with your life!"

Moody snorted his disgust. "With your life, eh? What about your death?" This time he zeroed in on Hermione, and her eyes went wide. "Do you trust him with your death, little girl?"

"I-I'm sure I don't know what you mean—"

"I mean," he snapped, not letting her fidget her way out from under his relentless scrutiny, "do you trust him to give you a good death? When you're lying there in agony, hopeless and dying, your life-blood

pooling around you, do you trust your man Harry to make the final blow? Do you trust him to make that necessary choice? What about Ron, here?" Without moving an inch from Hermione, Moody reached back, grabbed Ron by the scruff of the neck, and dragged him so close his nose nearly touched hers; so close he could feel her shaking. "Do you trust him with your death?"

"Stop it!" Ron yelled as he attempted to twist out of Moody's grip. "You're scaring her!"

"I'm scaring her, am I?" He instantly turned on Ron. "Welcome to the real world, where even the people you trust most can have the darkest of dark secrets; will watch you die slowly, feed off your agony like a leech."

"Blood Magic." Hermione said the words, but Ron had never heard her voice so desolate, so scared.

"And what do you know about it?" Moody demanded. He released Ron, who fell into a heap on the floor.

Hermione didn't shrink from Moody this time; her face was white and blank as polished marble. "I know what it is. It's the worst of the worst, darkest of the Dark Magic. They say that the power that's released at death – the spirit, the very essence of our beings – can be trapped and used to make another's magic more powerful, more deadly. But it can't be a clean death. There has to be torture. Pain. Suffering. Horrible—" She broke off, turned away from them.

"Someone's been doing her homework," Moody said slowly. "Good. Very, very good." He turned now to Harry and Ron, who had managed to pick himself up, though he wasn't sure what else he should be doing, so he'd stuffed his fists in his pockets. "So, who will it be?" Moody motioned to the boys with his left shoulder. "Harry or Ron? Black or Red?"

"Who will it be for what?" Ron asked, once again angry at Moody's tone.

Hermione, however, didn't hesitate. "Harry," she said. "It would have to be Harry, wouldn't it?"

"Right, then," Moody said. He grabbed Harry by the wrist, and then Hermione, and forced them to face each other. "Hold hands. No, Hermione's on the bottom. Right. Now look at each other. Right eyes, please. Look in, look deep. Relax. Good."

Ron didn't know what had just happened. He went from hating Moody for upsetting Hermione to hating Moody for giving Hermione over to Harry to hold hands with and gaze at all lovey-dovey. And there was a little sting in there that Hermione had chosen Harry over him, but Ron still wasn't quite sure what the choice had been about. Who was most likely to kill her? None of this felt right.

"Now slowly, the both of you are going to reach down inside to that place where you feel your magic stir. Don't lose the eye contact! Easy now, not too much." Moody began to ever-so-slowly back up, and reached out an arm to force Ron to do the same. "Hermione, you trust him. Remember that. He won't hurt you."

"Never," Harry whispered.

"Now, Harry, can you feel the heat coming off of her? Feel the energy just below it? The prickles? The tension? Don't go too deep, not this first time, Harry. Just a taste. Feel her energy below your hands, and then open up and let that energy rise up into your hands. Let it mix with yours. That's right. Easy now. Not too much."

The lights in the room hadn't changed, and yet both Hermione and Harry were more brilliantly lit than they had been a moment before. A breeze brushed up at them, lifting her hair off her shoulders just a little, rustling his shirt, but not reaching Ron or Moody, now on the other side of the room.

"Right, Potter. Now you have it. With her energy, not your own, light the fireplace. Careful not to mix the magic yet. You're not ready for that. Just take what she's giving you and—"

"Incendio!"

Instantly the fireplace erupted into a blaze so large it swept up the chimney and out over the mantle. The sconces on the walls exploded, and several of the stained-glass lamps in the room burst into flames. The curtains caught almost immediately, and fire licked the ceiling black before Moody could yell, "Aguamenti!" For a few odd seconds the room rained, and the fires went out. Everything went quiet.

And in that instant between chaos and stillness, Harry grabbed Hermione by the shoulders and planted a kiss on her mouth so fierce and intense Ron knew it would be seared into his brain for the rest of his miserable life. Tears pooled in his eyes, but Ron couldn't look away. Not even when she returned the kiss, or when her hands lifted to his head and ran through his soggy hair. And not even when Harry's arm lowered to that smooth patch of flawless skin at the small of her back and he pulled her closer. Their slim bodies met, stretched like a string on a bow. He bent over her, kiss after kiss, and she pulled him down with her. The air in the room was thick and hot and full of smoke. Water dripped from every surface.

Then, all at once, she wilted in his arms. Her head fell back, throat exposed, and her wet hair hung limp and loose as he lowered her to the ground. Harry yelled her name, screamed, and Moody was there by her side in an instant trying to push Harry far enough away to see what was wrong with her.

"Calm down, Potter!" Moody demanded. "She's fainted, not dead."

"Fainted? Why? Hermione doesn't faint! What's wrong with her? What do I do?"

"Nothing! Now, calm down!"

In a moment of clarity, Ron saw the scene for what it was: the fire, the water, the blast of energy and his fallen friend. "You took too much," Ron said, a frightening calm filtering through him, chilling him to the bone. "You've taken too bloody much."

"I haven't!" Harry said, sounding fearful and confused. "Have I? Have I hurt her?"

"She'll be fine," Moody assured.

"Who'll be – bloody Merlin!" Lupin came from the entry hall and took in the damaged room and then the unconscious figure in the middle of the soggy floor. "He didn't burn her, did he?"

"Nah," Moody said with a casual shake of his head. "The lad just got carried away. Her well's not very deep, it seems, but he didn't take enough to burn her."

"Burn me?" Hermione's words were slurred, and as she began to look around the room Ron noticed she had trouble focusing. "Am I burned?"

"Not a bit of it," Lupin cooed, kneeling over her. "How do you feel, Hermione?"

"Squishy," was her reply.

Both Lupin and Moody exchanged knowing looks. "I'll send Tonks a message," Lupin said. "She'll need some help getting cleaned up." Then he turned to Ron. "Can you carry her up to her room?"

"I'll do it—" Harry began, but both Lupin and Moody cut him off with a firm, "No!"

"You can't touch her again until she recovers," Lupin said to Harry, recovering in a conversational tone. "Until you both recover. You probably don't feel it yet, but when the adrenaline wears off you won't be in much better shape than she is at the moment. Incidentally, Harry, when you wielded her magic, how did it feel?"

"Unbelievable. Thrilling," he said unhappily.

"And now?" Lupin prompted.

"Terrible. Like I've beat her..."

"Good," said Moody, his magical eye focusing and refocusing on Harry. "Remember that, Harry. There are always consequences. Everything has its price."

Tonks arrived shortly after Ron laid Hermione out on her bed. Crookshanks hopped up to sniff at its mistress, hiss, and then bolt under the bed. Tonks tsked and gave Hermione a little shoulder shake. "You awake in there?"

"Flowingly," Hermione said.

"Yeah, I remember that feeling. Shared energy isn't for everyone. Thank you, Ron." Tonks dismissed him without even looking in his direction. She unlaced Hermione's shoes and tossed them by the over-stuffed chair.

"They say we have a shallow well of magic, but in truth, I think it's that we're more sensitive to our magic's absence. We are creatures of nature, you and I, Hermione, and as such we need our natural balances." While he watched, Tonks' hair went from pink and orange bouncing curls to a dark green and gold wave that seemed to have its own wind brushing through it.

She stripped off Hermione's sodden socks and draped them from two of the bed posts, and then lit a small fire in the fireplace Ron hadn't noticed before.

"Come, now, let's get you out of those wet clothes." She reached for the hem of Hermione's top.

Ron ducked out the door, heart hammering at the very thought of Hermione in wet clothes, and then getting out of them. And, well, if truth be told, of Tonks helping her out of them as well.

"He kissed me." Hermione's voice, soft and dream-like. A quality Ron couldn't remember hearing before. It stirred his insides, made him want to cry, and stopped him dead in his tracks just outside the door.

"Kissed you?" Tonks asked, surprised. "Did he, now?"

"On the mouth."

"Ron kissed you? In here? While you were like this?" The growing concern in Tonks' voice, and the accusation, left a lump in the side of Ron's throat. "I'll have to have a chat with that boy—"

"Harry," Hermione corrected. "Oh, Harry..."

There was a pause, and then, "Harry Potter?"

"There's something different about him, different from when we were in school. He's..."

"Grown up?" Tonks sounded more amused than anything. "Yes, yes. Your Harry is very grown up now, isn't he?"

"Very," Hermione agreed. "But...there's something more. I can't think to describe it. There's a ..."

"A what? Hermione? Oh, yes, then. Sleep well and sweet dreams."

End of chapter 2

Chapter 3 – To Be A Man

That night was a series of sleepless stretches of time for Ron interspersed with hatred of Harry, then Hermione, and then himself. Over and over he saw that kiss – The Kiss – played out in excruciatingly slow motion, always followed by Hermione's collapse and the welling of fear and anger deep in his belly.

When morning finally came in the form of diffused grey light, Ron dressed and went back down to the dining room that had yet to recover from the previous evening's excitement. With new purpose, Ron went to the fireplace, picked up a hand of Floo Powder, and stepped inside.

The Leaky Cauldron was murky and dark even in the early morning, and the barkeep didn't bother to look up from his counting of Knuts and Sickles when he said with a monotonous voice, "We're closed."

Ron hurried out into Diagon Alley, where there were the beginnings of people moving about: guiding brooms to sweep the front steps, opening shades on shop windows, and the like. Ron brushed the ash from his hair and clothes as he made his way down to Fred and George's joke shop at number 93. The sign on the door said that they opened at ten. Ron knocked anyway, and then again.

"What's the matter with you?" the sign squawked. "Can't you read? I'll read me to you! 'Opens at ten a.m.!' Not six fifty-three! Now go home and stop bothering me!"

Ron pounded on the door. "George! Fred! Open up!" Somewhere inside, a door slammed open.

"Do you think you're better than everyone else?" the sign asked. "That the rules don't apply to you? Are you special? Hmm? Think the world will start its day whenever you please, do you?"

George peered with bleary eyes out from behind the door's shade, obviously fresh from bed. He scowled, puffy-red-faced, at his brother.

"Oh, sure, ignore the sign," said the sign. "I'm only doing my job, you know. It's not as though I hang out here for the fun of it, day in and day out, in all kinds of weather."

"What is it?" George asked, once the door was cracked open. Ron didn't fail to notice he hadn't been invited in.

"I need a job."

"A job?" both George and the sign asked together.

"Well," the sign continued, "one would certainly think employment inquiries could wait until business hours!"

"Let me in," Ron said.

George considered him, then stepped back to let him pass. "Yeah, all right."

Fred appeared at the bottom of the stairs in his pajama bottoms, naked from the waist up. The right side of his hair stood straight out. "Who's died?" he asked. "Someone better have bloody well died."

"He needs a job," George told him.

"What? At seven in the morning?"

"Seems," George said with a shrug. "But I was thinking—"

"I know, I know. But is he up to it?" Fred shoved the heel of his hand in his eye and rubbed vigorously. "He'd be mostly on his own, you know."

"What are you talking about?" Ron demanded.

"We've been thinking of expanding," George explained. "A Hogsmeade branch, and then maybe in Edinburgh, as well."

"But we don't want to have to work the new storefronts," Fred cut in. "Hell, we don't want to have to work the one we've got."

"No, our genius is in development and testing of goods, not in the actual sales. We need someone who can manage the store, help the customers, take orders, that sort of thing."

"It's not brain work," Fred warned. "It's tedious and boring, and you have to watch out for the kids who'd rather not pay. Adults too, for that matter, though they're not quite as clever."

"But the hours are good. And it's not as if you've got to really do anything. Our stuff sells itself."

"Uh, right, then," Ron said with a shrug. "I could do that."

"Yeah?" George asked, appalled at Ron's lack of enthusiasm. "Is that all you've got to say?"

"What do you pay?"

"Pay?" Fred questioned, and then looked at his brother. "We didn't...did you think of that?"

"Not...as...such. No. What's the going wage?"

Fred shrugged. "Don't know."

"Doesn't matter," Ron said, and then sighed. "Just give me something to put in my pocket so Dad won't nag." He took a seat on the stool behind the worktop and glanced around the cluttered shop. So this was his life. Selling jokes. Ron thought he should've been more disappointed than he actually was.

"I don't need much," he added.

"Fred," George said, his eyes glued on Ron, "does he look right to you?"

"Just about," Fred said, now staring at Ron as well. "What are you on about?"

"Looks a little gray to me," George said. "Down in the dumps. Did you have a fight with your girlfriend?"

"How is Hermione?" Fred asked. "She's turning into quite the little treat."

"Shut up about her," Ron said, and kicked at a box at his feet. "And she's not my girlfriend."

"Yeah, you should do something about that, mate," Fred said. "Girls are like flowers; they need tending."

Ron rolled his eyes. "If you know so much about girls, why aren't you two—?"

"Who says we're not?" Fred asked smugly. He exchanged a knowing look with his brother, and the both of them glanced up the stairs.

"Sisters," George said with a grin from ear to ear. "Twins."

Ron forced his gaze away from the stairs and the new knowledge that his brothers had lady friends in their rooms. He shook his head. "Everybody but me."

"Hey now" – George leaned on the counter across from him – "it can be you, too. If not your friend Hermione, then why not someone else—?"

"There's no one else!" Ron snapped, then instantly regretted it. He hadn't meant to give so much away, and he knew that he had when George leaned back and looked over at his twin.

"So...what's up, Ron?" Fred asked in a weak attempt at sounding casual. "Mum tells us you moved into Headquarters. How's that working out?"

"Fine," Ron said through gritted teeth. He needed to get out of there, and quick. He had what he came for, so there was really no reason to stay. Except for the fact that he didn't want to go back to the manse, and he didn't have any money.

"Have a row with Harry, did you?"

Ron shook his head. "When can I start the job? It's in Hogsmeade, you said?"

"Come on," said George. "We're your brothers. I mean, sure we'll take the mickey, but we're bound to help in any way we can."

Fred added, "You've always been our favorite brother, haven't you? Best of the lot."

"You mean better than Percy," Ron quipped. "Gee, thanks."

"So what is it?" George prodded. "Is it Hermione, then? Did she turn you down?"

"That's rough, mate. And quite a shock, I must say. Always thought she had a thing for you."

Ron's brow wrinkled. "You did?"

"But there are other birds, Ron."

"No," Ron said. "No, there aren't."

The twins looked at each other, regrouped, and then Fred pulled a couple of Zombini's from a small hidden compartment behind the counter. With a flick of his thumb the tops flipped off and a strong smell of earthy alcohol filled Ron's nostrils. Fred pushed the bottle into his brother's hand and said with all seriousness, "Care to tell us about it?"

Might as well, Ron thought. They weren't going to let him off the hook. He swallowed and waited a moment for the fizz to settle in his stomach before letting out a ripping belch.

"We were Fated," Ron said at last, and surprisingly he felt a little better.

"Fated? You and Hermione? No!"

"He means True Lovers, does he?"

"Yes." Ron took another swig and gave off another belch. "Her and me. Fated."

"That's wonderful!" George exclaimed while Fred gave him a playful punch on the shoulder. "Have you told Mum? She'll get her knickers in a bunch over this one. One of her brood Fated? She'll die from happiness."

"I said we were," Ron told them. "As in past tense."

"How's that?"

"Didn't think it worked like that."

"Not supposed to—"

"No, it's not." Ron felt the anger again, twisting through the beer. "But it has. We were hexed."

"Oh, bloody—" George said, his face suddenly solemn. "That's awful."

"I didn't know that could happen anymore. Didn't the Ministry ban those particular spells?"

"Yes," Ron said. Another drink, another burp.

Then, as if on cue, Fred and George headed up the stairs.

"Hey!" Ron protested, but Fred turned and gave a reassuring grin.

"If there's a way to break the hex, you know we're the ones to find it," he said. "Oh, and you start tomorrow. We'll send you the address by Errol. Don't worry, old chap, we'll get this all sorted out."

"It's not that easy," Ron called after them. "Now she's Fated to Harry."

Both brothers froze on the stairs. "Noooo!" George whispered.

"That is a problem," Fred agreed.

"Harry and Hermione? Do they know?"

"He does," Ron said. He had a bitter taste on the back of his tongue that had nothing to do with the beer in his hand. "I don't know that he's told her yet."

"But she must know. She must! If I were in Love with a bird, and then suddenly wasn't, I think I'd know something was up."

"But wait—" George said, putting out an arm to calm his excited twin. "If you're not Fated to her anymore, Ron, then why are you still mooning over her?"

Fred cuffed his brother on the back of his head. "Stupid question. Because he still fancies her! Just because he's not her True Love any longer doesn't mean the underlying love emotion-thing is gone." Then Fred turned back to Ron. "We are using the L-word, now, aren't we? We're not going to be coy, are we?"

Ron shook his head miserably.

"Then wait...she must still love him, too! I mean, it only goes to reason."

"Well, sure she does if she ever did, but remember, unlike Ron here, she's Fated to someone else. So yes, she's got this lovely little love for Ron, but she's got big fat Love for Harry."

"Huh," said George, "Not quite so simple as we originally thought. And to be honest, I don't know enough about this stuff—"

"No, neither do I. We'll need some outside help."

"Definitely."

The two of them gave Ron a look that seemed more pity than anything else. He took another deep drink, letting the pungent liquid pour down his throat, knowing he hadn't even had breakfast yet and not really caring.

Ron was completely drunk by the time he made it back to number 12. He managed to make it up the stairs – no thanks to the insults and jeers of the hallway portrait of the Widow Black – mostly on his feet, and then into his room, only scuffing his shoulder against the door jamb. Bed. Sleep. Then maybe a shower, he told himself. Or maybe not. It seemed a lot of hassle with the knowledge that he was just going to get smelly again later. On the way to the big bed, Ron kicked off his shoes, tugged his shirt off over his head, and unzipped his jeans. Each motion seemed more laborious than the last. It was too much to ask his legs to balance while he tried to step out of his trousers, and when he had them down halfway, the floor seemed to suddenly swing up and slap Ron in the face.

"Stupid floor. Who put you there?"

"I must say, young man, you don't look at all well," said Lucy the mirror.

Ron rolled over, but sitting up seemed a bit much for him at the moment. He opted for kicking his jeans completely off, and then busied himself with trying to remove his socks with just his toes. It took a long time.

When Ron woke, he felt less numb and more sick. It took some effort, but he managed to lift himself from the floor, and with his hands steadying his head, he turned and found Hermione in the doorway, wide-eyed and mouth agape.

"Sorry," she whispered, then shot from the room.

It was another couple of moments before Ron registered that he was wearing nothing but his gray briefs and a tube sock that hung off his right foot. She was going to have to learn to knock, he decided, unable to get anymore worked up than that fleeting thought. With his

head pounding, his stomach miserable, and the rest of him hating life, Ron crawled onto the bed without bothering to get beneath the covers. Supper was again a bust. This time Harry produced cheddar and loaf of bread.

Ron stared down at his plate with a scowl. "This is just wrong. Harry, you've got to get a house elf or something."

"We don't need a house elf," Hermione protested. "It's just food. If you don't want this, I'm sure there's something else in here we can eat."

The three of them began to go through the cupboards, but it seemed that no one had recently been to the grocer. There were some dried beans, a couple of tins of stale biscuits, and not much more.

"I need more than just cheese and bread," Ron whined. "These are prison rations!"

"If we're going to live here," Harry said, once the last of the cupboards was raided, "then I guess we're going to have to set up house. Fend for ourselves."

"Makes sense," Hermione reluctantly agreed. "Only, I lost my position today at the flower shop. It seems I overslept...by a number of hours." She glanced at Harry self-consciously from the corner of her eye, and then, as if she just realized what she was doing, she gave Ron a guilty look.

"So," she sighed. "I'm still penniless." She sat down heavily at the table and ran a fingernail over the scratched surface. "I wonder if, perhaps, my parents were right. If maybe I'm in over my head here."

"Of course not," Ron began, but Harry brushed past him and took a seat on the bench next to her.

"Do you want to go back to Hogwarts?" he asked. "The year has only just started; it would be easy to make up what you've missed."

"What I've missed? Not we?"

"I can't go, Hermione, you know that. I've got to find the Horcruxes and Voldemort—"

"I don't know what I was thinking," she said with a self-conscious chuckle. "Of course we can't go back."

But Ron knew. She was thinking if they could just slip back behind the thick castle walls they could pretend for one more year that they were still children with nothing more to fear than the next Potions exam. The allure was there, yes, but they all knew it wouldn't be that way any longer. Dumbledore was gone now. Voldemort was alive and thriving. Ron had become a murderer. Their Hogwarts days were best behind them, where those memories could be kept safe and treasured. Whether they were ready for it or not, life had dragged the three of them forward.

"You can go, Hermione," Harry said, barely above a whisper. "One more year. Think of all the things you could learn. Yes, you should go."

She turned a suspicious eye to him. "Are you trying to get rid of me?"

They were too close together. Any doubt that had been in Ron's mind previously was completely erased now. Their bodies, their faces, all far too close. Ron cleared his throat. "I'll cook," he announced. "But I'm not cleaning."

Harry smirked at him. "Does that mean you're not thinking about going back to Hogwarts, either?"

"Hell no. I've got a job that starts tomorrow," Ron told him. "So don't worry about the money thing, Hermione. It's not that important. We're a team, right? Harry's got money, and I'll have a least a little income, and I'm sure you'll find something else before long. After all, you're tons more employable than me, and I talked Fred and George into letting me manage their new Hogsmeade store."

"Fred and George have a Hogsmeade store?" Harry asked.

"You're going to manage?" Hermione asked.

"I'm as surprised as you are," Ron told them. "But I reckon if Fred and George can do it, how hard can it possibly be?"

Lupin showed up not long after that, and with empty bellies they all retired to the drawing room and pushed the furniture against the far wall.

"Hex on you all!" Lady Black called after them when they passed her in the hall. "Haven't you filthy little mongrels destroyed enough of my home?"

"Gather round," Lupin said, and they circled up in the middle of the room. "Now then, I thought tonight we'd work on our Patronuses. It's N.E.W.T. level magic, but I'm sure you two will master it just as well as Harry has done."

"Actually, Profess – I mean Remus – we already have Patronuses," Hermione proudly announced.

"You do? Corporeal Patronuses? I didn't realize your Defense Against the Dark Arts class was so advanced."

"It was more Harry than a class," Ron said with a shrug. "Dumbledore's Army, you know?"

Lupin became very serious. "Was it now? Well, then, let's see what you've mastered."

"Have I – did I do something wrong?" Harry asked.

"Not really, Harry, no. But you must realize that advanced magic can be extremely dangerous, particularly among those who are not prepared to take it on. Let us see what you all can do before we worry too much."

The next thirty minutes were spent in creating Patronus after Patronus. Hermione had the most difficulty coaxing her otter to retain its shape, something Lupin attributed to the drama from the previous evening. Harry by far had the strongest patronus, and he was years

ahead of both Ron and Hermione in being able to control it and direct it, which was only to be expected. He was, after all, the only one of them who'd ever had to use the spell in battle, and they all knew it was a spell at which he excelled.

Ron, however, was still quite pleased with what he was able to create. His little dog was fast and nimble, and able to do a back flip by the time Lupin called an end to the session.

They had begun to move the furniture back when Lupin asked, "You all right, Hermione?" Ron turned to see she had tears in her eyes.

"Yes," she said quickly, and gave him a watery smile. "I can't believe how tired I am. I slept all night and half the day."

"Why don't you get some more rest, then? Ron and Harry can finish up down here."

"Uh...Remus.... Do you think...I have some questions...." She was nervous and fidgety, and she motioned to the door with her elbow. All very un-Hermione-like.

"Of course," he said, not seeming to find this odd in the least, and quickly followed her from the room.

Harry raised his brows at Ron. "What was that?"

"Got me."

"You don't think it's about us, do you?"

"Us? You mean you and me? Or you and that kiss you smothered her with last night?"

"I...." For a moment Harry was speechless, and Ron felt the now familiar anger begin to creep up from his belly. "Ron," he said, "that...that was an accident."

"No, the fire was an accident. Kissing Hermione was not."

Harry looked away, his nostrils flared. "Look, I Love her—"

"No!" Ron yelled. "It's a curse, not Love! It's not real!"

"To me, it feels real. Like True Love. It's amazing, the most amazing—"

"Well, to me it feels like a huge gaping hole has been punched into the middle of me, and my two best friends are standing around snogging while I bleed to death in front of them!"

"I know, I'm sorry—"

"Are you?"

"I didn't want it to happen this way!" Harry's arms flew up in exasperation. "You were there, Ron, you know I didn't want to have to...."

"Steal my Love?"

"Oh, come off it! I saved her life! We both did! And besides, you two may have been Fated from birth, but you never once acted on it. You had years with her and you never so much as held her hand—"

"We were children!"

"And maybe some of us still are!"

Without thinking, Ron pulled back and punched his fist into Harry's nose. Blood and snot flew everywhere, and Harry landed flat on his back in the middle of the carpet, his glasses crooked and broken over his head. "Ow," Harry carefully said from the floor. "Ow. Ow."

The regret was instant and resounding, and more disturbing than the anger had ever been. "I'm sorry," Ron mumbled, pulling his wand from his pocket. "Harry." He pointed the wand at his friend's face, and Harry's eyes went wide.

"R'n, don'!" He curled into a ball and rolled on to his side.

"I broke your nose," Ron told him. "I was going to fix it."

Harry peeked back at him and, deciding Ron was sincere, rolled flat onto his back once more.

Ron snorted. "So much for trust," he muttered.

"Ye boke m' n'se!"

"It was an accident," Ron said flatly, and then took aim. "Episkey!"

The blood didn't vanish, but the pain must have because Harry sat up, then sprang from the floor just as Lupin came back into the room. He stopped short when he saw the state Harry was in.

"Is there a problem?" Lupin asked.

"No," Harry said casually. He picked up the pieces of his glasses. "No problem." Then he breezed by Lupin and up the stairs before any questions could be asked.

Ron shrugged at his former teacher and followed, only to retreat to the sanctuary of his room.

End of chapter 3

Chapter 4 – Killing Him Softly

The following morning, bright and early, Ron left the manse via the dinning room floo for the Hog's Head tavern in Hogsmeade. 81¼ Leather Wings Lane was just three streets up. The storefront was not much to look at: a large, grimy window; a narrow door; and a broken and faded canopy that proclaimed Hector's Snapping, Clapping, Tapping Turtles and Turtle Supplies. Ron couldn't remember having ever seen it before. The place was not quite what he'd been expecting, and he checked the parchment Errol had delivered earlier that morning.

"Oh, no. Not you again." Ron looked up to find the same sign from the Hogsmeade Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes staring at him. "Ten o'clock! We do not open until ten o'clock! Now go away."

Ron pulled his wand from his pocket and tapped the door, which instantly unlocked.

"Bloody hell," said the sign. "I hate my job."

The inside of the store was even worse. It was dark and musty. Dust and filth covered every surface save the dozens of boxes that were piled in the center of the floor. In that respect, the shop looked a lot like his bedroom back at the manse.

Attached to one of the boxes was a parchment addressed to "Ronald Weasley, Employed."

He didn't want to know what the note said. This wasn't what he'd signed up for. An easy job the twins had told him, 'the jokes practically sell themselves.' Well, nothing was going to get sold in that pit of a shop. What did they expect him to do?

Then he noticed the small tapestry bag, tied with ribbon. He picked it up and enjoyed the heft of it, the wonderful clink of coin on coin. Unable to staunch his curiosity, he opened the bag and stared down at gold. Real gold!

Well, all right, then. Now he wanted to know what the note said.

Dear Ron,

We trust the boxes arrived this morning, along with your first week's pay. Great place, yeah? Yes, it needs some fixing up, so keep a tally of the costs and we'll send reimbursements at the beginning of each week. More boxes to arrive shortly.

Sincerely,

Your brothers in blood and commerce

Fred and George

Ron looked back down at the pouch. The money was his. His! Never in his life had he seen so many coins in one place, let alone owned them.

Right. He tried to focus his thoughts. He had a job. He had money. This is what it is to be a man. So, what to do first?

The boxes? The dust? The lack of light? He didn't have the faintest idea where to even begin. But, he did have an idea as to who might. Hermione was still in bed when he made it back to number 12 Grimmauld Place. He found her under a pile of fluffy blankets, her hair wild and tangled across the pillow and Crookshanks curled in a ginger ball just above her head. The cat blinked at Ron a couple of times, but decided he wasn't worth any effort what-so-ever and went back to sleep.

"Hermione?" Ron whispered, not wanting to startle her. She didn't respond. "Hermione? Wake up." For a second or two he thought he might have to jostle her a little, and he tried to think how to go about it. Where did one touch a girl to wake her? Her shoulder? Hermione's was bare.

"Ron?" she asked groggily, a grin spreading across her sleep-swollen face. She came awake all at once, sat up straight as a board, and demanded, "What are you doing, lurking about my room?"

"I was trying to wake you."

"Oh." She covered a yawn with the back of her hand, and Ron realized that she was sleeping in one of those sleeveless shirt-things girls usually wore under other shirts. It stretched across her breasts as she inhaled. Nipples! He could make out the shape of her nipples! It stunned him that she even had nipples. Ron began to panic. Hermione had nipples.

Yes, yes, of course, he thought, trying to calm himself. Everyone has them. And yet...

"Ron? You all right?"

He nodded, turned away, and tried to think of something else – anything else. Nothing at all came to mind.

"What do you want?" Hermione asked, now a little annoyed. "And what time is it, anyway?"

"Get dressed," he told her, heading for the door. "There's something I want you to see."

"Wait, Ron—"

He was in the drawing room when she came down a few minutes later in jeans and a blue top, hair brushed but still fluffy and wild. She looked well rested, Ron thought.

"So what's the big mystery?" she asked. Her earlier irritation was now replaced with intrigue, and maybe even a hint of excitement. "And just for the record, it's not yet nine in the morning. I'm hardly a loafer."

He shrugged. No one had called her one. "This way," he said, and then led her to the fireplace. With a grin he told her, "Diagon Alley, next stop."

Her expression of disbelief and horror was much like what Ron imagined his had been when he'd first seen the store front. Hers, though, were for a different reason.

"Snapping, Clapping, Tapping Turtles and Turtle Supplies? Seriously? There was an entire store devoted to just one type of magical turtle?" She leaned forward and cupped her hand to the grimy window to peer into the dark store. "Can't imagine why it's not around any longer."

"We don't open until ten a.m.," the sign announced.

Hermione stepped back and read: "Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes." Her face lit up, and then darkened as she looked back at the little store. "Oh, Ron, is this where they have you working?"

He nodded and let her into the shop. "I was upset when I first got here, but then I found this," he explained, and handed her the bag of gold. "One week's pay," he told her proudly.

Her eyes bulged. "One week! I never knew there was this much money in jokes and silliness."

"I'll split it with you," he said, and when her eyes lifted to his – her clear, bright, brown eyes – he choked.

"I mean," he added after clearing his throat, "since you need a position, and I've not the foggiest how to even go about making this a store, and there's more money in there than either of us could possibly use in a week..."

"Are you hiring me, Ron?"

Hiring Hermione? Would she even consider working for him? "I'd rather, I reckon, be partners. Fifty-fifty."

She considered this, and then glanced around the shop again. "There's a lot of work to be done," she said at last. "And I'm sure you could use the help."

"Oh, I could," he assured her.

"And this is quite a lot of money, especially since we're living with Harry and don't have to worry about letting a place."

"Yes, it's quite a lot of gold," he agreed.

"But Ron, I'm not sure it's a good idea."

He was gobsmacked. "Not a good idea? Why not?"

"Well, for starters, we tend to fight. A lot."

"No we don't!"

"And running a place of business is difficult and stressful, and we'd be together all day here and then live in the same house at night. That's a lot of together time."

"Sounds about the same as when we were at Hogwarts for the last six years."

"Did I mention we fight a lot?"

"Oh, for Merlin's sake!" He kicked one of the full boxes, and something small exploded inside.

"Ron, be serious. I can't possibly work here with you."

Would she have said yes before? When the Fates were still with him and Harry was someone she considered a very good friend, but nothing more? Did she think of more with Harry now? Had she ever thought of more with Ron? He tried to think back and really couldn't remember those particular thoughts about Hermione having ever entered his head while they were in school. Yes, he'd been jealous when she'd shown interest in other boys; one Viktor Krum came to mind. But that was more because, well, she had no business going to a dance with anyone but him. She was his best friend, after all, and a girl. And being Hermione, who knew things, she should've worked out that it was bloody awkward to ask girls out and saved him the trouble. She should've known he was going to get around to asking her. Eventually. Right?

Now, looking back, it didn't seem quite so right as it once had.

"I've messed things up, haven't I? Made a right blunder out of it all." The store was an impossible job. What had he been thinking? He took the sack of money from her and tossed it back on the boxes. "Never mind. I'll return the money to Fred and George and tell them it was a bad idea."

"What? Because of me? Because I said no you're going to give up? Just like that?"

"Doesn't matter." Without another word he walked out of the store.

She followed closely. "Ron! Ron, wait!" Her hand found his arm and she stopped him. "What is it? Tell me what's going on? You, of all people, are not a quitter! What is it?"

Her pleading killed him. "Don't you know? Can't you feel it?" He grabbed at his chest, at the raw emptiness that screamed when she touched him. "How can you not sense this?"

He felt shaky, out of control. He closed his eyes, tried desperately to reign in the storm inside him, but a tear escaped his left eye anyway, and her confused expression turned to surprise, and then fear.

"Right," he muttered. She thought he'd gone mental, and maybe he had. Maybe that's what happened when the soul was split in two. But, how could she not feel it? Maybe she did and just didn't care that he was gone.

Her eyes flew back and forth between each of his, and he could see she was desperately trying to come up with some answer for him. But it was useless, he knew, because there was only one answer he needed. Hands still shoved in his pockets, Ron ducked his head and kissed her. A gasp escaped her lips. Her mouth was soft, sweet, her lips dry and warm. She didn't pull away, at least not at first, but she didn't touch him, or deepen the kiss like she had with Harry.

It wasn't fair. Even when Ron stole a kiss, Harry was still between them – where he would always be. Ron pulled back and didn't open his eyes until he'd turned and began to walk away from her. He couldn't bear to see the look her face would wear now. That their first and last kiss should be what it was, gentle and brief and sad, seemed almost too appropriate. This wasn't fair, he thought again, to any of them.

"This never happened," he called over his shoulder. He knew she wasn't following this time. "Just forget it."

Ron didn't go down for dinner because for the first time in his life he didn't have an appetite. Besides, he didn't want to have to face either of his friends, both of whom he betrayed. Harry was her Love now, and no matter what Ron felt, nothing justified kissing a friend's Love. He wasn't even sure why he'd done it. To stun her out of the hex? To startle up some deep-seated trace from their old bond? The truth was probably closer to the fact that he wanted to know what Harry now knew, and he wanted her to feel for him the way she had felt after Harry had kissed her – neither of which happened.

When the knock came, as he knew it would, Ron forced himself up off the bed and trudged to the door. Harry was on the other side, and an odd feeling dripped over him, thick like honey. Ron had changed in the day since he'd last seen Harry (last punched his best friend in the face), but Harry hadn't. In fact, Ron could tell that for a moment Harry seemed stunned at the change he saw in him.

"You OK?" Harry asked with real concern. "Moody's here."

"Yeah," Ron said. "Right."

"Where's Hermione?" Harry asked. "I thought maybe she was holed up in her room like you, but she's not in the manse, as far as I could see."

"She didn't come home?" Ron asked. He must've really upset her. "I'm such a cad."

"Did you have another row?" Harry's tone went flat.

"Seems to be all I'm good for these days."

Harry nodded. "You might want to think on that."

Moody was in the newly restored dining room waiting for them. He handed them both a length of rope when they came in. "Two things, lads, before we start. Number one, you are expected to behave as gentlemen while living in a house with an unchaperoned young witch; and, number two, the fastest way to kill a friendship stone cold dead – even one as tight as yours – is to fight over a witch. I hope nothing more needs be said on the subject." He turned from them, but his magic eye didn't look away.

Both Harry and Ron glared, not at each other, but at Moody. Who the hell did the old wizard think he was, anyway?

"Oh, and three, Kingsley has arranged a time for both of you to take your Apparation exams. End of next week. We expect you'll each get your license without too much trouble. You both know how to Apparate, yes?"

They nodded, and Moody grunted his approval. "Well, we'll see about that, won't we?"

"Now then, each of you take a length of rope between your hands and focus on the tension there. Feel the strain of the fibers beneath your fingers. That's right."

For twenty minutes Moody had them explore their own energy reserves and send small pulses of magic back and forth from one hand to the other via the length of cord. It was boring, tedious. Ron wasn't altogether sure that he was doing anything at all.

"What am I supposed to be feeling?" he whispered to Harry.

"Dunno," Harry whispered back. "Doesn't feel the same as it did before."

Ron snorted. "Really? Can't imagine why a rope would feel different than your girlfriend."

Harry scowled.

The next half hour was a little more interesting. Moody took the ropes away and had Ron and Harry try to transfer their energy from one hand to the other without physical conduction: a task infinitely more difficult. Ron tried to focus, tried to dig down to his inner well. He even held his breath, but nothing seemed to happen. He was beginning to think Moody was having them on, when a small blue ball of light twinkled from the center of Harry's left palm and then lazily twittered its way to the center of his right.

"Very good!" said Moody animatedly. "Well done!"

"That was it?" Harry asked, doubtful.

"That was it? That was the exact same thing that transferred between you and Hermione the other evening. That, my boys, is pure magic! Interesting that yours would be blue, though, Harry. If I remember correctly, Lily's was yellow and James' had a bit of orange. Normally warm or cool colors run in the family."

"They do?" Harry asked.

"Well, mostly, I should say," Moody corrected. "Not always. I'd be interested to know if Miss Granger's energy has a blue hue," he muttered, but not quite under his breath. Ron picked up on the insinuation immediately. Was Harry still carrying her magic inside of him? Jealousy wriggled inside Ron's gut.

"Now you, Ron, let's see what color you are."

It was like attempting to blow the clouds away. After a while, Ron decided he'd had enough. "This is going nowhere."

He was defeated, and he no longer cared. Harry had the power, the girl, and what did Ron have? A promising shop career. One would

think that with all the time he spent in Madame Trelawny's tower, someone might've clued him in to his pathetic future.

"Harry's the wizard, not me. I'm wasting everyone's time."

"No!" Moody said, cuffing the back of Ron's head. "There's no room for self pity here. It's wasted energy, and we can't have that. Now, take hands, the both of you. Ron on the bottom."

Both of them stared blankly at the wizard, and his magical eye zeroed in on Harry. "Try not to snog this time," Moody quipped, and then let out a belly laugh that woke the portrait in the entry hall. "Come on, now, time's a wasting!"

Reluctantly, Ron held out his hands, palms up, and set his jaw against Harry's look of anger. Harry roughly took up his hands, like a challenge, and Ron instantly felt a jolt pierce hotly through the center of his palms.

"Did you do that?" Ron asked.

"Sorry," Harry muttered, not looking the least bit sorry.

"Enough talk! Mouths closed!" Moody began to slowly circle them, his wooden foot stomping unevenly on the floor. Ron couldn't help but feel a little like a hunted puffskein. After all, he had Harry in front of him shooting proverbial daggers at him, literal bolts of energy with his hands, and Mad-Eye Moody limping about them with the kind of glee one would expect from Snape just before he announced a surprise exam.

"No!" shouted Moody. "Look at him, Ron. Concentrate on him. Let yourself trust him – put everything else aside. Nothing else matters, just the here and now, just his hands and yours, just your magic and his. Good. Better. Now, Harry, slowly...very slowly..."

It took a few moments before Ron felt anything, and then there was a coldness that began at his fingertips and crept slowly toward his elbows. He was certain that Harry's magic was reaching inside him –

what an odd sensation. Not at all intrusive, but rather an almost comforting sensation, like a warm blanket or belly full of porridge.

"Careful, Harry. Not too much. Just take the magic he's giving."

"He's not giving me anything," Harry managed to get out through gritted teeth.

"What? No? Ron, come now. Give him a little. Just relax and trust. Not too much, Harry, just take a little off the top. Come now, be a man!"

Be a man. Moody said it only once, but Ron heard it over and over, and instead of Harry in front of him, Ron saw Malfoy. Draco Malfoy with his pale skin against the dark of the floor of the cave, and the blood, and the anger that surged through him. Malfoy had hurt Hermione. He'd cursed her, and Ron hated him with every last fiber of his being, and the hate boiled into fury, into rage, into death...

There was screaming, and at first Ron thought it was himself because his mouth was open and his throat was tight. But as he oriented, it was clearly Harry who was screaming. He just stood there and screamed.

Odd, Ron thought.

Moody snatched their hands apart before Ron could think anything farther, and Harry instantly spun to face the empty fireplace, threw out his hands, and yelled, "Incendio!"

The blast was instant and constant, something Ron had never witnessed before. Fire didn't fly from Harry's finger tips, but rather from an enormous ball at the back of the hearth, where it then shot straight up the floo with a roar so loud one might've thought a train was ripping through the wall. The heat from the blast knocked Moody back a couple of steps, and he held up an arm to shield his face.

"Stop!" Moody ordered.

"Can't! There's too much!" Harry turned his head away, but his outstretched hands continued to strain toward the fireplace and began to shake under the strain.

"Help him, Ron!" Moody commanded. "You gave him too much! Take some of the burden back!"

"How?" Ron asked, and reached for his friend.

"No!" Moody yelled. "For magic's sake don't touch him! Do you want to blow us all up? Close your eyes. Find your magic, it's yours so you can find it. Look outside yourself. Find it and calm it. Don't force it, Ron! Don't take what isn't yours! Just find your lost magic and bring it back home. Yes, that's it. Good, lad. Easy now. That's enough. Harry can handle the rest. Very nice, the both of you. And that was wandless, Harry. Remember how that felt."

Ron wobbled a step to his left and then opened his eyes again. The room was quiet once more, and only the fireplace looked the worse for wear this time; the bricks and center of the mantle were blackened from the heat. Harry stood near Ron, chest heaving, sweat rolling from his flush face and down his neck, tears streaming down his cheeks. He stared out at nothing.

"Weasley!" Moody snapped. "Come here!"

Reluctantly, Ron obeyed. His knees felt weak, and his heart still hammered.

"Look at me," Moody told him. "And give me a hand."

Ron stared into the wizard's human eye for not more than a moment or two. He couldn't tell that Moody's hand actually touched his, but Ron felt a definite magical tremor, followed by the jarring sensation of his insides being ripped up through his throat. When Moody pulled away, Ron doubled over and choked.

Moody laughed triumphantly. "Do you know what you are, boy? What the Fates have given us? You're a Smisurato! A Smisurato! Ha-HA!" He danced around the room a little, his heavy leg banging

unpleasantly. Instantly he was back in Ron's face. "No one knows, do they? You've not told anyone?"

"Told them what?"

"No, no. You don't even know how lucky you are – how fortunate we all are to have you with the Order. Don't tell a soul, Weasley! Constant vigilance!"

"Uh..." said Harry. He looked sick. "What's a Smisurato?"

"It's Ron!" Moody exclaimed. "It's what you felt when you tapped into his magic! It's the wizard with the magical well that can't be drained! It's the endless, boundless magical energy, so rare they say only one wizard possesses the gift for every ten generations. And we've got you!"

When Mad-Eye smiled, he looked akin to one of the gargoyles outside the Ministry of Magic. Probably why, Ron reasoned, he rarely did it.

"We'll call a meeting for tomorrow night. Just the key people again, don't want too many others getting wind of this." Moody grabbed Ron by the front of his shirt and pulled him right up to his face. His breath smelled of turnips. "Swear it! Not a word, Weasley. Not a whisper to anyone."

"Uh...I swear."

Moody released him, and Ron's head felt like it floated off his shoulders. "I think perhaps I should lie down for a moment," he said, and then watched as Harry fainted backwards to the floor.

"Stamina," Moody said, disgusted. He clasped his hands behind his back and began to pace the floor. "We need to work on stamina. And control, of course. And finesse. This kind of power used like a club will get us all blown up."

"Uh...Professor...sir...Harry's down there," Ron said, pointing to his unconscious friend.

"And you need to work on yourself," Moody told him sharply. "There's nothing wrong with your magic. It's you who doesn't know how to use it properly. It's time to get serious, Weasley. Be a man!"

With a heavy sigh Ron trudged over to his friend and knelt down to give his cheek a good, hard smack. Moody caught his wrist on the up-swing.

"I told you not to touch him, Weasley. You don't listen."

"I was going to rouse him," Ron tried to explain.

"If you touch him now that your magic knows its way to Harry, you risk burning him with everything you've got. And needless to say, that could kill several people. Or several hundred."

Ron looked at his hand. It was large and red, and it knew murder. And now, he saw the real possibility of doing to Harry what he did to Draco. Men killed. Every inch of Ron went ice cold. Even that part of him where nothing resided any longer.

End of chapter 4

Chapter 5 - All Safe In The Ether

Morning came early for Ron, and in the middle of a wonderfully pleasant dream. Breasts. Lots of breasts. With nipples that poked out from behind thin little tops. Loads of them in pairs; and all of them rounded and pale and flawless. But then there were two large brown eyes staring down at him in the dim light, and a face that he recognized. It smiled at him, and he sleepily smiled back. It took a moment before he realized what he was looking at.

"Hermione?" he asked. Belatedly, he realized the state of the rest of him, and he sat up bolt-straight in the bed while he scrambled the blankets into a bunch over his lap. Why was she in his room? "Is something wrong? What's wrong?"

"Get dressed," she whispered. "There's something I want you to see." A shiver ran down his spine.

"Uh," he said, but then stopped himself. She was already gone. Downstairs, he found her in the dining room, next to the fireplace. She looked like hell, but he knew better than to say so. Her hair hadn't its usual fluffy gloss, and her face was pale and pinched as if she hadn't slept all night – a theory supported by the fact that she was wearing the same jeans and light blue top she'd worn the previous morning, although now they were covered in ash and smudges that looked suspiciously like grass stains. Ron frowned. When had he begun to notice what she wore? If he was to be honest, probably sometime in fifth year. But he didn't want to be honest with himself at the moment.

He followed her to the Hog's Head via the Floo Network, where they easily slipped from the tavern without being noticed. On the street they dusted each other off and headed toward Leather Wings Lane. Of course Ron knew where they were going, he just didn't know why. He reckoned it was still possible that she'd stayed away from the manse because he'd upset her – though now that he thought about it, it didn't seem very Hermione-like. Odds favored she'd thought of some way to make him feel bad for the stolen kiss, something to make him think twice about ever doing something so bloody thick

again. It was also possible, he suddenly thought, that she'd found him alternate lodgings. Leather Wings Lane probably had loads of places to let that even Ron could afford. It made sense in a terribly upsetting sort of way that she'd want to be alone in the manse with Harry now; that Ron had suddenly become the third wheel.

His feet began to drag as they rounded the corner. He dreaded the inevitable. He would go, of course, if she asked. Wouldn't he? He knew that he would, even though he wasn't entirely sure he could take another blow like that. How many times could one's spirit splinter before one simply ceased to exist; before the ether swallowed him whole?

"Look, Hermione," he said, stopping in the street. "You don't have to do this."

"Do what?" she asked, but walked on. She was hunched over, arms crossed tightly across her chest against the crisp morning. She did briefly glance back at him, but she didn't wait.

He followed. He couldn't not.

It wasn't until he stood directly in front of the sad little storefront that Ron actually looked at it. His heart skipped a beat. Gone was the snapping turtle canopy, and in its place was a freshly painted sign proudly proclaiming "Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes: Magical Jokes and Assorted Sundry" in purple and orange. The windows were so clean as to show a display full of brightly packaged toys and pranks and odd bits of novelty magic. The parcel boxes were gone, the dust and dirt nowhere to be seen. Beside the door sat a barrel full of dark red begonias in bloom. Even the front step was swept clean.

"I-I don't understand," Ron said in a stunned stammer. "This is brilliant!" He turned and saw her beaming smile. She was brilliant. "How? Why?" The questions reminded him of his fears, and the hollowness inside began to ache. "There's a flat upstairs, isn't there?" Fred and George always liked the idea of a business owner living above his establishment.

"There is, but it's far from livable. I've used it as a storage hall until we can get it sorted out. Come on, I'll show you where I put everything." She covered a yawn with the back of one hand and pulled out her wand with the other. One tap and they were inside.

Ron stood stunned in the doorway. Where once there was only gloom, now there was a bright, cheery store with actual aisles and merchandise and a freshly-cleaned scent. There was a worktop, much like the shop in Diagon Alley, and a small cupboard with baskets of samples on top. There were price tags, price signs, a bell to ring for service, pale green shag carpets bewitched to blow like long grass in the wind. Along the side wall, next to the stair, was an enormous bookshelf crammed with wizarding newspapers, magazines, and novelty books. Ribbons hung from hover-globes that pressed against the ceiling, and great baskets hung on the walls brimming with Plush Creatures (Fred and George's new line of stuffed toys that seemed to come to life, but only when their child-owner was in the room).

"You're bloody brilliant, is what you are!" Ron crooned, and Hermione's smile widened even more. Never in his life had he felt a strange and powerful urge to kiss her, and yet now it hit him so hard it made his palms itch. As if now that he knew what it was like to press his lips to hers, he craved her. Or, he reasoned, perhaps it was simply the knowledge that he shouldn't – couldn't – kiss her that made him want to. The excitement in him fizzled when he considered this.

"I'm glad you like it," she told him. "I began to doubt my judgment around three this morning when I accidentally conjured those flowers in the entry instead of that Vacuum Spell that's good with dust and cobwebs out of reach. What is that spell, by the way? Do you remember?"

He shook his head. If it was a Cleaning Spell, odds were he never knew. "You did all this? Alone? How did you manage it? And why?"

"Why? Seriously? Ron, you're being dense. We both need positions and this pays better than anything else we're likely to find."

"What about us fighting too much? Or it not being wise that we spend so much time together? You said no."

She looked a little sheepish, but she brushed the questions off with a shrug. "You said we could forget all that."

All that. Well, that was one way to think of it, Ron supposed.

"You should know," she continued, changing the subject, "that most of the gold is gone. We needed supplies and things, and, well, I didn't have anything else to use."

Gold didn't matter, she was going to work with him! Side by side! Every day! Just...the two of them. Even if he couldn't kiss her...or touch her... This, he told himself, as his elation sank in his belly, this was a good thing. Wasn't it? She turned and pulled a box of Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans from an awkward position on one of the bottom shelves and stretched up to place it on the top with the rest of them, and Ron eyes slipped from her gently rounded backside and slim waist, up her lithe body to her slender, smooth neck. Oh, yes. It was good that he'd be able to spend every bleeding moment of the day with Harry's girl. Talking and joking and fighting together, but never anything else because she was Harry's Love. Hiding his gazes, his heart, his agony every second he was conscious because she was just out of reach, but never, never out of mind.

Ron doubted he'd still be alive by week's end.

A magical tinkle sounded, and then the store door opened. "Your sign says you be closed," said a small, round man in white robes and a flat white cap.

"Come in," Hermione said by way of greeting. "You're our first customer."

The man placed a stubby finger by his bulbous nose and pursed his lips in thought. "I shall be your last, as well, my dear, but not today. Not today." He turned and began to browse the shelves and tables.

Hermione waved to Ron to help their first customer, and he dutifully sprang to life. "Is there something in particular you're looking for?" Ron asked as professionally as he could. "Perhaps some Lemon Bursts? Or a sack of laughing powder?"

The man leaned a little closer to Ron. "Word is, the Weasley lads got themselves a line of specter traps." His round eyes narrowed. "One might be in the market for one or two of those."

"Uh..." Ron grunted and looked at Hermione for help.

Her face already showed concern. "Excuse me, sir," she began as she came towards them. "Specter traps are for entrapping souls, are they not? And forbidden by the Ministry of Magic for all except Aurors."

"Well, now." The small man turned to her. "One might find something akin to a specter trap, but not exactly as such, and then one mightn't be obliged to inform the Ministry, now would one? And I'm told you have some such thing."

"Who told you that?" Hermione demanded.

"Never mind," Ron jumped in, not liking the tension in the air. She hadn't slept, so she came by her irritability honestly, and Ron didn't want her to end up in a duel with their very first customer. "I don't think we carry specter traps, but maybe you'd like a nice, legal box of Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans?"

"Fred Weasley is the man," the customer told them. "And he said you'd be discrete."

"He did, did he?" Her jaw tensed and her lips tightened.

Ron ran around a display table and jumped in front of her. "See, we're only just opened and not everything has made it out of the boxes yet—"

"If your delinquent brothers have specter traps in any of those boxes, Ron—"

"Why not give us a day or two to settle in? Maybe check back in at the end of the week?" Ron was trying hard not to hear the rant going on behind him. Something to do with Fred and George and Azkaban Prison. And gerbils, if his ears weren't deceiving him.

"Very well," the man muttered unpleasantly, then turned on his heel and hobbled out the door. Another magical tinkle.

"Did you know your brothers were involved in the black market?"

Ron shrugged. "Of course not. But knowing them, it's not entirely a shock, now, is it?"

She threw a bag of fuzzle grubs at him, and they ricocheted off the side of his head. "How will I explain an arrest to my parents, Ron? They think I'm looking for Muggle work! Something safe! Not trafficking in illegal magical weapons. And how dare your brothers expose us to something dangerous and potentially disastrous to any future careers we might have without even telling us! This is so like them: no regard for anyone else. In fact, I have half a mind to tell them so myself!" She turned and headed for the door, but Ron managed to sprint just ahead of her and block the exit.

"You don't really want to do that, do you? I'm sure it's just a misunderstanding or something."

"Ron, get out of my way." He hung his head and stepped aside.

It wasn't difficult to keep up with her. Hermione wasn't in any rush. She trudged back through the Hog's Head floo, and then into the Leaky Cauldron in Diagon Alley. It would be nice when Ron got his Apparating license the following week and they could circumvent the Floo Network all together. Come to think of it, though, he should probably get some practice in before they went for the test. He decided he'd bring it up to Lupin that evening.

Determined, Hermione continued to stomp down Diagon Alley. Ron trailed after her, though he had more of a shuffle and carried his

hands in his jeans pockets. He was fairly sure she was about to get them fired. "Are you sure?"

"Ron, don't."

He didn't really think he could talk her out of whatever it was she was going to say, he just didn't want to be around to witness it. Come to think of it, why was he following? Common sense would place him as far from Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes as one could get. He was still contemplating this as he shadowed her through the door.

George came from the back room, and his face lit up at the sight of them. "How now? Hermione! Good to see you! And Ron, how's the store going?"

"How's the store going?" she asked in a voice mocking George's. "How's the store going? You mean the front you've set up to sell your black market novelties? And us as your accessories? How dare you? Ron is your brother! How could you set him up like that? Have you no conscience?"

"No conscience?" asked Fred, who had just come down the stairs. "What's she on about?"

"You're the worst sort of wizards, the both of you! Doing anything to make money, damn the consequences to yourself or the people around you! People who trust you! Your brother, for magic's sake!"

"Did we do something?" Fred asked George. George shrugged.

"Apologize to your brother," she demanded.

The twins looked at each other and smirked.

"I mean it, damn you! Apologize!" Her voice went high and shrill, and the twins lost all sense of humor in the moment.

"Sorry," they said in unison, thought Ron could tell they hadn't a clue as to what they were apologizing for.

"And for future knowledge, we shall not be selling specter traps or any other illegal items from the Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes in Hogsmeade. Is that perfectly clear?"

"Specter traps?" Fred looked genuinely stunned. "What is she on about?"

"Did she say 'we'?" George asked.

"We don't make specter traps," Fred said quickly. "Nothing of the sort. That stuff gives me the creeps."

"See," Ron chimed in, relieved. "It was a misunderstanding."

Hermione eyed the brothers suspiciously. "There was a man. Short and round. He said you promised him specter traps, which sounds like something you dim-witted midge-brains would do! Honestly, boys, why stop with something only illegal when there are Unforgivable Curses out there? You could make an Imperious biscuit treat! Or a Crucio bonnet! Why not get your entire family involved? I'm sure Ginny will be happy to keep her brother company in Azkaban!"

George and Fred exchange looks again, this time much more frightened than amused. Hermione was on the verge of complete hysteria.

"If you don't care about yourselves, or your brother, then what do you think this would do to your mother if she found out? Specter traps! And Ron – in many ways he's her baby, you know. Her youngest son, the last man she'll send out into the world. Her last chance to make up for the likes of you two!"

"Hey, now," the twins objected in unison.

She threw up her hands in frustration, her anger having finally got the better of her. "How could you be so stupid?" Her face crumpled a little, and for one terrifying moment Ron thought she might cry.

"You're right," said Fred sidling up to her left, his voice smooth as velvet.

"A completely convincing argument," George said, stepping up to her right and taking her elbow in hand. "We've been stupid."

"Careless," Fred agreed. They walked her to the door. "It's shameful, really. I'd like to say we just got carried away—"

"But there's no excuse," George finished. "We see that now."

"Yes, well, good." Ron couldn't believe she was buying their lines. She was clearly upset enough to have muddled her head.

"And you're right about Ron, as well." Fred said this. "He's a fine chap and we wouldn't want him to get in trouble."

"Not on our account."

"No, never. It would kill Mum."

"Right," Hermione breathed. "You're trying to get rid of me."

"Not us," George feigned innocence, but his huge grin gave him away. "Hermione, we like you..."

"And we like that you take care of Ron," Fred added.

"But we're not making specter traps or anything of the sort."

"It's not our style."

"Trust us," they finished together.

She studied them both for a moment with a critical eye. Then, a hint of a smile crossed her face. She forced it down. "I've got my eye on the two of you," she said firmly, and then turned and left. They watched her go.

"And I've got my eye on you," Fred whispered, his gaze full of her denim-covered rear.

"Hey, now," Ron protested. "None of that."

"Like the way she stood up for you, do you? Don't think we didn't notice that bit of protective posturing," George said happily. "Maybe she's not so un-Fated to you as you thought."

"Maybe," Fred said, relishing his sudden thought, "now the three of you are Fated together. Make a nice little Hermione sandwich, that would—"

"I said none of that!" Ron scowled and threw his hands up at his brother in disgust.

"What? A little ménage-à-trois? Juicy!"

"Shut it!" Ron yelled.

The twins laughed. "Come, now," Fred said. "You can't tell us that you haven't thought of it at least once since you found out your True Love was stolen from you."

"What?" Ron was horrified.

Fred turned to his twin. "Speaking of which, brother, we should owl leggy Lucy again," he said. George nodded enthusiastically.

Ron groaned and shoved the heel of his hands into his eyes and rubbed vigorously, trying to get whatever image that just popped into his head to disappear forever into the void. The very last thing he ever wanted to think about was himself in the middle of one of his brothers' deranged sexual exploits.

"I can see why you're fixed on her," Fred said, more serious now. He leaned against the display table Ron was leaning on and crossed his arms. "It's very nice to have someone stick up for you, especially when it isn't necessary."

"She reminds me too much of Mum, for myself," George said absently as he fiddled with some gag candy in edible wrappers. "Nags too much."

Ron nodded. That she did. "I think something's wrong with me," Ron told them, not entirely sure he wanted broach the subject with these particular brothers. But it wasn't as if he had many other choices of people to turn to these days, and he supposed the twins did have a way with women, though he wasn't sure what that way was. With a sigh he admitted, "I've become a bit obsessive. You know, since the Fate switch."

George's interest was piqued. He grinned broadly. "Like how?"

Ron shrugged. "If I was Fated to her before, and therefore Loved her - with a capital L - then how come I never thought about how adorable her face gets when she's trying so hard to be earnest that she pushes into the melodramatic? Or never once noticed the shape of her elbow? Or thought about kissing her. And now, I can't stop. She's all I think about. When she's not around I'm missing her terribly, and when she's in the room, I'm desperate to get away. She's like a potion that's got into my blood, or something. Like bad magic." He rubbed at the hollowness in his center that began to twinge around the edges as a picture of her in her t-shirt and pajama bottoms flittered through his head. "You think maybe I'm having a reaction to the hex or something? Maybe I'll die from it?" Yes, there was real hope behind that last question. Ron simply couldn't imagine a lifetime of this.

"Fred, I do believe our little brother is growing up," George proudly announced.

"You're not sick," Fred assured him. "We think about women all the time."

"Not like this," Ron grumbled.

"All the time," George concurred. "When we're not thinking of more jokes, that is."

"Or money."

"Oh, yes, money," George crooned. "Love that stuff."

Ron shook his head. They were absolutely no help whatsoever. "I best be getting back to the shop," he said, more miserable than when he came in.

"Hey," Fred stopped him. "That wizard's from the Ministry. We think he's an Auror trying to catch us slipping up. He's been around here a couple of times. But we don't so much as dabble in the Dark Arts."

George nodded. "These are troubled times. We don't want to accidentally get mixed up with the wrong crowd. Honest. You've got nothing to worry about from us. Just don't let him bother you."

Not a second later a tall, blonde young lady entered the store and gave a friendly wave to the twins. She went for the pucker whistles and pulled one off the shelf to examine the box.

"Right on time," George crooned. "There you are, Ron. She's a lovely bird. I also happen to know that her boyfriend dumped her two days ago, and she's ripe for a rebound man."

Fred gave Ron a shove on the shoulder. "Go get her!" he urged.

"What? No!"

"She not pretty enough for you?" asked Fred. "Because as juicy as your Hermione is, Stella Willowgrove is fit!"

"Look at that hair," George whispered in Ron's ear.

"Look at those hips," said Fred on his other side.

"Those breasts."

"Those legs."

"Oh, yes, the legs."

"Shut it," Ron growled. He didn't want to look at Stella Willowgrove's legs or anything else.

"Look," George said practically, "we're not telling you to bag her, just go over and say hi. Maybe ask her to join you for an ice cream or float or something."

"I don't want to," Ron told them.

"Coward," said Fred. "Here's a girl who will actually have you, and you're saving yourself for one who won't."

Ron gave him an angry look. His brothers knew how to prod him into doing just about anything. He hated that about them. "Fine," he growled. "Fine."

Ron took a deep breath and went over to the girl. He guessed her age to be about his, though reason said she had to be a least a little older if she wasn't in school. He thought about that again. He didn't remember ever seeing her at Hogwarts, so maybe she hadn't gone to school – not everyone did. Maybe she was a squib, or maybe her family didn't want her to attend.

He was stalling, and he knew it. Ron shoved his fists into his jeans pockets and tried to think of something clever to say. Then he just tried to think of anything. "I'm Ron," he ended up blurting out.

"Oh." She turned and looked at him. "Hiya, Ron."

She looked a little slow on the up-take, and so Ron gave her a little prodding. "What are you called?"

"Stella," she said, and then thought to add, "Willowgrove."

Well, at least he'd established an introduction, never mind that he already knew her name. He watched as she glanced nervously over to the twins, who gave them both thumbs up. Ron had been set up.

"Fancy an ice cream?"

"Oh, yes," she said, and her eyes glazed over. Ron was pretty sure she was already tasting it in her head. He followed her out of the store, snarling at his brothers, who were whooping on his behalf.

Stella was a study in simplicity. She chose cream flavored ice cream with clear crystals and white sparkles, in a bowl. It was hardly worth handing over the two sickles, Ron thought. He got his own ice cream and settled on a bench he'd shared with Hermione ages ago when they happened to spot Harry pass on his way to fill his Second Year shopping list. Had he really been Fated to her then? It didn't seem possible.

"Mmm." Stella was happy with her treat. It was the closest thing to a thank you he was likely to get out of her. Not that he really cared. "You're lovely," she said, and licked her full, pink lips.

"Uh...thanks."

"You can kiss me, if you want."

"Uh...no thanks."

She seemed to take the rejection in stride, and turned back to her treat.

It was a warm day with a pleasantly cool breeze, and Diagon Alley was thick with wizards and witches out to shop and stroll.

"Do you know Harry Potter?"

"Uh...yeah."

"Your brothers said you did."

"Yeah."

Her hand shot to his knee and gave it a squeeze. Ron jumped, squealed a little, and his cone landed upside down on the pavement.

She giggled a ridiculously shrill little-girl giggle. "You're funny," she said.

"Yeah." He stood and walked away.

Harry proudly displayed the entire contents of his shopping trip on the oversized kitchen table. Much of it was sweeties and snacks, but in the center of the lot was a roast the size of the hole in Ron's soul.

"What the bloody hell am I supposed to do with that?" Ron asked. Hermione passed over the bag of Doritos and opted for a green apple. She took a bite and a few drops of juice collected at the corner of her mouth. Ron felt his face go red.

"Uh..." Harry hesitated, and frowned at Ron. "Cook it. You said you'd do the cooking. What's wrong with you?"

"Wrong with me? What's wrong with you? Cooking is heat up some beans or something, but that's a whole - oh, to hell with it." Ron didn't feel like arguing. He was hungry and tired and miserable. With a sigh he grabbed the hunk of meat still in plastic and tucked it under one arm. Ron didn't know how to cook it, but he knew who did.

"Ron!" His mother greeted him with a smile and a kiss on the cheek. She brushed ash from his shoulders. "You look tired," she observed frankly. "Sit and I'll make you a cup of tea."

"Actually, Mum, I need you to teach me to cook this." He dropped the roast on the small worktop and the impact rattled the window.

She looked startled. "You want to cook?"

"I don't want to," he whined, and then slid onto the table bench. "But I've not had anything real to eat in days, and I think I might shrivel up if I don't get some food soon."

"Poor thing," she cooed. "Living on your own is harder than you thought, is it?"

He shrugged. "It's certainly not what I was expecting. Though I can't honestly remember what that was at the moment. I know I wasn't expecting that," he said with an angry eye on the meat.

Molly pulled out her cutting board, a couple of knives, and a small box with a dozen different tiny compartments, each holding a different fragrant spice. "Cooking isn't difficult," she told him with a gentle smile over her shoulder. "The spells are easy. The real trick is in the seasoning."

He grunted his indifference.

"I'll send you home with some recipes," she told him. "Never you fear. But come over here, Ron, and I'll show you some charms, and you can tell me some of what's got you down, if you like. You haven't had another fight with Hermione, now, have you? Hmm?"

With a sigh, Ron shoved himself up onto his feet and scuffed his way to his mother's side. She was much shorter than him now, and he'd never really noticed when that had happened.

"Mum," he said, and leaned against the worktop. She'd begun to trim the meat and sprinkle some spices along the top and sides. "Mum?" he asked. "Are you disappointed in the twins?"

She froze mid-sprinkle. "Of course not, dear. They're my sons. I adore them."

"I mean about not finishing Hogwarts. About making jokes and pranks for a living."

"I know what you meant, Ronnie. And no, I'm not disappointed in you, either. You're a bright, friendly, caring young wizard, and I've never had to worry about your intentions. You've a heart of gold, Ronald. Have from the start." She pulled her wand from her apron pocket and mumbled some spells that lit the heavy iron stove and pulled a roasting pan from the cupboard.

"I worry, of course. A mother worries about her children, and it's not exactly jokes and gags for you and Harry and Hermione, now is it?"

Your father says the Order has the three of you on a rigorous schedule learning important things, but he wouldn't go into detail. Doesn't want me to worry more than I already do, I expect."

"Did he tell you I'm a Smisurato?"

She gave a gasp, dropped the pan on the stove, and let out a high-pitched squeal of pure glee. "You're not! Are you now? A Smisurato? Honestly? A SIMSURATO? You're not! Are you? YOU ARE! That's amazing! I don't think we've ever had one in the family! I don't think our family has ever known a family with a Smisurato in the family! That's amazing, Ron! Wonderful!" She stopped long enough in her bounce around the kitchen to give him a big hug around the middle.

"You know, of course," she said into his chest, "that I've something new to worry about. If you're a Smisurato then they mean to train you with Harry, don't they? It means you won't just be on the sidelines anymore." She pulled away and inhaled deeply. "No matter." Her smile was genuine, her eyes were still sad. "You're with the best of the best. You'll all take care of each other, I'm sure."

"Yeah," he muttered.

"A Smisurato! Imagine that," she said to herself, and chuckled as she turned back to her cooking. "My baby boy...."
Dinner was a success at number 12 that evening. Roast beef with potatoes, fresh bread, and creamed woray, which was like spinach but purple and therefore delicious. Harry was moaning with pure pleasure by his second forkful. Hermione laughed at his delight, and at the heap Ron put on his plate, and at just about everything else. She was in a fine mood, and Ron said as much. She changed the subject.

"Is it Moody tonight, or Lupin?" she asked.

"Moody again, I think. We're going to work on the energy sharing thing."

"Doesn't it have a name?" Hermione preferred things neatly labeled. She scratched absently at her neck, a motion Ron wouldn't have even noticed if not for Harry sitting up straight on the bench. He shook his head at her until Ron turned and looked at him.

"What?" Ron asked, irritated. Then he looked back at Hermione and the dark mark peaking out from her pink collared shirt. At first he didn't understand. Then, slowly, realization dawned on him.

She pulled her collar against her neck to cover the love bite.

That was the end of Ron's appetite. Instead, the anger in his belly felt like a handful of rocks in a worn-out sock. For a moment Ron thought he might lash out at Harry again, might hit him just to get the fury out of his body. And then he thought he might turn on Hermione, which scared him. At his core, Ron had never been a wizard of violence. He was a pacifist, and if truth be told he fancied himself a little cowardly as well. But now that that core had been ripped from him, it seemed he was perfectly capable of turning on his friends: people he cared a great deal about. He was beginning to wonder, though, if they cared anything about him.

He looked down at his full plate, and a sense of sick sank through him. He considered leaving the table, maybe to find the loo.

"Look," he said after a while. "I know what's going on. And I know there's nothing I can do about it. I know it. Just...not in front of me, all right?"

"Er...sure, Ron," Harry managed to get out. His throat seemed very tight, and the words sounded strangled.

"And maybe you could be more...careful about..." He glanced to her neck again, but her fingers covered the mark.

"We didn't do this to hurt you, Ron." She sounded less contrite than Harry, and much more offended. "It's not as if we sat around and said, 'How can we ruin Ron's day?' It just happened."

"I don't want to hear about it happening!" Ron shouted, and pushed himself up from the table. "Do whatever you want, just leave me out of it!" He stormed from the room just as tears burned in his eyes.

The lesson with Moody that night was an exercise in pain for Ron. For three hours Harry sucked energy from him, and Ron was told stay put, stare into his eyes and let him take. By the end of the night they were able to stand a full meter apart and still maintain the link. A major feat, Moody declared, hobbling around the room in delight. Ron just felt emptier.

Hermione was bored, as might be expected, and busied herself with several thick books and researched whatever it was that Hermione researched in her down time. To her credit, not once did Ron catch her gazing at Harry. To his credit, he only thought about her breasts twice.

He slept deeply that night, and dreamt about her body in the bed with him, warm and solid and soft. Her back was to him, though, but he tried not to let it bother him. She was there with him, and it was his dream, so what was the harm? He kissed her on the neck where Harry had left his mark, then below her ear, on her shoulder. Her hand came up to his resting on her bare waist and guided it around to her front. He felt her ribs, her impossibly smooth skin, and then the weight of her breast filling his palm. Her nipple was tight, hard, like it had been that morning he woke her up, and she gasped a little when he squeezed it. Her back was warm on his chest, her rear cradled snugly against his lap. He felt her hand reach back for his hip, and then slide lower down his thigh before she pulled it closer, over her own leg, and she pressed back into him. His hardness pressed against her softness, and he found himself pushing forward, pressing against the crease made by the warm rounds of her rear. The sensation was exquisite, and he moaned against the back of her neck. She began to move, to rub against him with rhythm, and her nails dug into the skin on his leg. With his mouth on her back, his hand over her breast, he rocked with her. He wasn't inside her yet, but the friction was delicious. He moaned again. Another moan answered, but it wasn't hers. It was male, and startlingly familiar. Harry? What the hell? Why was Harry in his dream? Another hand came from somewhere in front of her - a male hand - and it covered hers on Ron's thigh. The two of them squeezed together, moaned together.

Ron woke screaming, and spent the rest of the day hating Fred and George for planting that particular suggestion in his subconscious.

End of chapter 5

Chapter 6 - Happy Birthday, Hermione

The next couple of weeks went by without much in the way of excitement, which suited Ron just fine. He hadn't seen any condemning clues that Hermione and Harry were still at it. In fact, it was just the opposite: when the three of them were together it was more like old times than it had been in a long while. They were beginning to find a routine, while Ron continued to have very explicit sexual nightmares.

Harry and Ron received their Apparation licenses on the first try. Ron's mum beamed with pride and made the three of them a roast beef supper with all the trimmings. Hermione seemed happy for them, too, but Ron found her to be distracted much of the time, and occasionally (and for no discernable reason) on the verge of tears. Twice Ron watched as she cast a simple Second Year spell, only to have it blow up in her face. She tried to hide it from Harry and the rest, but she couldn't hide it from Ron. So, she began to withdraw from him, and made excuses to not be in the room with him.

As the lessons with Moody and Lupin progressed, it finally became obvious to everyone that something about Hermione's magic was off. Both Harry and Ron's Patronuses grew stronger and easier to control. Ron was even able to send an intelligible message through his little dog. Hermione's, though, began to change color, and at one point morphed into a pair of fluffy, yellow socks. This, of course, just furthered her distress, which made her more determined, which made matters worse. Lupin began to tutor her alone more often than not, supposing that without Harry and Ron present she wouldn't feel the need to compete. He didn't understand that Hermione's only competition was herself. Was Ron really the only one who could see that?

Lupin also worked with Ron while Moody had Harry and Hermione in the other room doing Merlin knew what. Ron was supposed to be learning to concentrate, which seemed akin to actively trying not to think about Hermione (and worked just about as well). Control was supposed to be the key to his talents as a Smisurato, but it was very clear to everyone - including Ron - that he was a sorry git when it came to control. Hermione, he decided, would've made a much better

Smisurato. Well, not at the moment, he supposed. At the moment she was a mess. Ron had to remain silent to her new habit of questioning her own decisions, large or small, for fear that she'd erupt in tears. Harry noticed it, too, Ron knew, but the two of them didn't talk about her. Actually, they didn't talk about anything anymore.

And still, not everything was tense. When magic wasn't directly involved, the three of them got on well enough. Ron's cooking grew marginally better as he became more comfortable with the idea. He even took to wearing the apron his mother sent along once he ruined a pair of pants and shirt when a pot of woray boiled over, and Hermione refused to let him wear them anymore. She even took money out of his next week's pay to replace them, over his repeated protests. Spending good gold on clothes - the girl was demented!

The day before Hermione's birthday Ron opened his first-ever bank account with Gringotts using the money he'd managed to save from his salary at the shop. But he held back a couple of galleons to find her a gift. He'd never bought anyone a birthday gift with his own money before, and it made him a little nervous. What did one get the girl one's best friend stole? Jewelry, Ron decided. After all, what else did girls like? He went down to the Golden Box, and peered inside at the glittering, garish bobbles. There were so many to choose from. Rings, necklaces, earrings, bracelets...he didn't even know where to begin. The old hag inside wave him in, and Ron reluctantly obeyed. The store was musty and dark, over-packed with boxes of treasures, table displays magically lit to make the shining metals and stones sparkle. There wasn't much room to negotiate, but that hardly mattered. Ron wasn't about to browse.

"Gift for your girl?" the hag asked. Her toothless grin reminded Ron he hadn't brushed his teeth yet that day. "No, not for your girl," she corrected herself. "For someone else's girl. Yes, I see that now." She meant that figuratively, of course. Both her eyes were clouded to a milky white.

"It's her birthday," Ron explained. "I thought maybe she'd like a necklace or something." Thinking back, though, he couldn't remember if she wore jewelry or not. Small stones in her ears, sometimes, he guessed. Maybe a thin chain around her neck. Maybe.

Perhaps Hermione wasn't the type of girl to wear jewelry. He should probably get her a book. A book was safe. Or maybe sweets?

"Wait," said the hag, holding out her hand to stop him from leaving. "I've got what she needs." She turned and opened a small cabinet, and pulled out a little wooden box etched with stars and fitted with a tiny, delicate, brass clasp. She pushed it across the wood worktop to him.

Inside Ron found a thin gold chain, delicate and smooth beneath his fingertips. A small charm hung loosely from it, in the shape of a four-leaf clover. "A luck charm?"

"Tis not very big, neither's the magic, but it'll send a little luck her way. I never met a body couldn't use a little luck. But better than that, it's a ward."

"Is it?" It was terribly small. "It can't ward off much bad luck, can it?"

"Not much," the hag admitted. "But then, she's your friend's girl, now, isn't she?"

"Yeah." She was right. He had to get her something small. Something that a friend would give a friend. Something that wouldn't trigger a complete emotional breakdown. "It is kinda pretty," he told himself.

The hag gave a confident nod. "I'll wrap it for you."

When Ron made it home the next evening, he'd left Hermione to close the store. She'd started the day in good spirits, but with every passing hour that Ron hadn't mentioned her birthday she'd grown more sour and difficult to tolerate. He was glad when he finally made it back to the manse, and the lively atmosphere in the parlor. The fire was roaring, the wall sconces were ablaze, and still the room was cool and comfortable for a late September evening. Balloons and hover globes and streamers in every color hung from the ceiling, and flowers in vases decorated the table tops. A dinner was set up on the sideboard, and Ron realized with glee that he wouldn't be expected to cook that evening.

Tonks and Lupin had arrived. Lupin wore his normally shabby tweeds and patched sweater. He gazed at Tonks with her hair bouncing and bright as ever. She looked happy, really happy, and it made Ron smile. The two of them were talking to Fred and George, who were telling a very physically animated story, and to Hagrid who looked both excited and desperate to fit in at the same time.

Ron's dad came in, and clapped him on the arm. "Hear you're doing well, son. Your mother and I are very proud of you."

"Yeah, thanks," Ron mumbled.

"Mad-Eye told me about how well your Patronus is coming. That was one spell I never really got the hang of. Mine always looked like a sickly cow or something. Your mum, though, do you know what her Patronus is? A dog! Just like yours! Well, not like yours. Moody tells me yours is a terrier of some sort. Your mother's is more a retriever. But I thought that was wonderfully interesting, don't you, Ron?"

"Is she here?" Ron asked, deliberately changing the subject. He looked around and saw Hermione's parents off to one side, a glass of pumpkin juice in each of their hands. They seemed nervous, and when Mr. Granger caught Ron's eye he inclined his head in acknowledgement. Not a smile or a hello, but then, the last time Ron had seen them their daughter was lying unconscious in a hospital bed and Ron had been the one to explain why. He'd told them it was all his fault, that she'd been trying to protect him. He told them he was sorry, as he'd truly been. He hadn't mentioned what he'd done to Draco. It seemed a long, long time ago now.

"She'll be along a little later," Ron's father said, and it took a second for Ron to remember that he'd asked after his mother.

Neville came in with Luna Lovegood, the blank-eyed blond he'd been friendly with for the last year or so. It was good to see the two of them, who were still at Hogwarts and were therefore still a connection to the past. Neville looked good. Taller and thinner than before. More grown-up. Ron nodded to his friends, and they came over to greet him.

"Good to see you, old man," Neville said with a toothy smile. "How are things on the outside?"

Harry came in then, smiling and looking very put-together. He said his hellos to the Grangers, thanked them for coming, and then went over to Ron.

"Is she on her way?"

"Shouldn't be too long," Ron told him. When he left she was adding up the receipts and counting the money in the cash box. They'd had a fairly busy day at the store so it could take a little longer than usual. He'd felt guilty leaving her there, it being her birthday and all, but he had to get home before her to make sure everything was ready. And it was. Dobby the house elf was just turning on some music when she came in.

"Surprise!" the room shouted. Hermione froze.

To say she was surprised was something of an understatement. She took one look around the room and then burst into tears, turned, and ran out. Not quite the reaction they were going for. Harry went to follow, but Tonks stopped him.

"I'll go," she told him.

Harry let her, and turned back to Ron, his face full of concern and confusion. "Was she all right when you left her?"

"Yeah," Ron said. "Why? You don't think...you don't think that after I left the store...that someone...that something happened? Do you?"

For a heartbeat Harry stared at him, confusion turning to fear. Then the both of them bolted out of the room to find her. In the hall they heard her wet sobs coming from the kitchen downstairs, and the sound of Tonks' gentle voice trying to quiet her. Ron was about to push the door open when Harry caught his arm and motioned for him to be quiet.

"There, now, have some of this. It'll help calm you."

"Milk?" Hermione hiccupped.

"My father always said nothing was as soothing as a nice glass of milk. You want to tell me about it? Did something happen?"

"Well..." She hesitated and Ron was about to go in, Harry's protests or no, when she continued with: "Oh, Tonks, I've had the most horrible day."

Hearing this Harry set his jaw and gave Ron a shove.

"Did you and Ron row again?"

"What? Oh, no. We hardly fight anymore. It's not Ron."

And Ron, vindicated, shoved Harry back.

"I must look the fool." Hermione's voice got stronger as she became stern with herself. "All those people in there came here just for me, and I lose it like this. Ridiculous!"

"No one will care about that. They just want to know that you're all right-"

"Tonks, I'm not! I haven't been for a while."

"What is it?"

"I don't know!" The sound of her fists hitting the table startled the boys. "What if we're doing the wrong thing by being here? What if leaving Hogwarts was the worst decision in the world?"

"Hardly the worst decision," Tonks said to pacify her. "I can think of a lot worse."

"I'm no good with magic anymore. I've poured over the books for years now, I know the ins and outs of spells, and at the end of the day I'm weak. My magic is weak because I can't focus, I've no control

anymore. I feel as if I'm coming apart at the seams. I'm a liability to the boys, and to the Order."

"No," Tonks insisted. "Name one single time you've endangered Harry or Ron."

Hermione sniff. "And that's it, isn't it? Harry or Ron. Ron or Harry." She burst into sobs again, and Ron turned away from the door. It was difficult to hear her so sad. "Tonks, is it possible to love two wizards at once?"

"Uh...I dunno. I've only ever loved the one," she said honestly, and a little taken aback. "But don't tell me both Ron and Harry."

There was a sniffle, and the sound of a nose being blown. "I hardly know anymore. I mean, I've had...feelings...for Ron for some time now. Forever, maybe, I don't know. But then, recently Harry... It's different with him. It feels different, and still very compelling. And poor Ron is just miserable, I can tell, and I don't know how to make things better, and everything I do just makes it all worse. And still I can't help but do. Every choice I make is wrong, every thought is bad -"

"Come, now, Hermione, you know that's not so."

"Lupin," she sniffed. "He told me you're expecting. The two of you." There was a long drawn-out silence. "It's all right, I swore I wouldn't tell anyone. I only bring it up now because I wondered...how you knew...when you first knew...how did you know?"

"Good goblins, Hermione! Don't tell me you think you're-"

"I don't think," she said quickly, and her voice cracked. "In fact, I'm almost certain I'm not."

"Almost?"

Once he registered what she was implying, Ron stopped thinking. Nothing existed within his head but dark red fury. His hands went for Harry's throat, and when they made contact a horrible growling scream ripped from his belly. He drove his friend backward and into

the wall next to the ancient grandfather clock. Harry struggled against the lock Ron's fingers had on his neck, over his windpipe, squeezing and crushing. The door from the kitchen banged open, people rushed down from the parlor, hands pulled at Ron to force him to release his hold, but the hatred made him strong. It took a blast from Arthur's wand to down him. And, once he was on the floor, he didn't move.

"What the bloody hell?"

"Harry, are you all right?"

"Ronald Weasley! What has gotten into you?"

Everyone was talking at once. Shouting, really. Except for Harry who was coughing more than anything else. And maybe gasping a little for air.

Ron was pulled up by the front of his shirt, and forced to his feet. His father got in his face.

"What is the meaning of this, lad?"

Ron shoved his father's hands away. "I'M. A. MAN." And men kill. His voice was low and controlled, and reflected all of the anger that blazed within him, and it sent his father back a couple of steps. Everyone in the room was staring, but Ron didn't care. His full attention was on Harry - a person he could no longer consider a friend; a person he wanted to hurt with every fiber left in his being; to make him feel just a miniscule amount of the pain Ron knew.

A thud, followed by a whoosh came from the dining room above, and a moment later Ron's mother Molly, and his sister Ginny, both covered in ash and smiling broadly, came down the stairs. They stopped short as they realized everyone was standing and waiting for something to happen. Ginny's eyes widened at the sight of Harry and she ran over to him.

"Sprites abound! Harry! What happened? Are you all right?"

"Fine," he said through a choke.

She put a few fingers against the already forming bruises on his neck. "Oh, Harry, this is why I hate being back at Hogwarts without you! I worry about you getting yourself hurt all the time!" She threw her arms around him and rested her cheek against his shoulder. "You must be more careful, Harry. What happened?"

"Yeah," he said non-committally and glared daggers at Ron. Harry pushed her away a little, and Ginny looked adoringly up into his face. Her eyes poured into his, and he had to look away.

That's when she leaned up on her tip toes and kissed him.

"No, Ginny," he said as kindly as he could. "You see, a lot has happened."

Ron snorted. "I'll say."

Harry carried on, ignoring him. "You see, Hermione..."

Ginny turned and smiled at her friend. "Right! Hermione! Happy birthday!"

"Thanks." For the first time Ron saw true guilt on Hermione's face. He found some satisfaction in that.

"I meant to say, Ginny, that Hermione and I..."

"What?" she asked, as if she couldn't imagine what could possibly be so horrible that he wouldn't want to tell her. Poor, clueless Ginny.

"You." Mr. Granger said; a statement not a question. "And my daughter. Here. Under one roof. Unchaperoned."

"Calm down, Clive," Mrs. Granger said quietly, and placed a hand on her husband's arm.

"I will not!" he insisted, and pointed to Hermione. "You will come home straight away. Tonight."

Her face dropped even more if possible, and then went stony and blank. "I won't, Father."

"Like hell you won't," he took a few steps toward her, but Harry stepped between them. "Get out of my way, son."

"You can say what you like, sir, and do what you think is best, but the fact is that Hermione and I are Fated. I'm her True Love, and she is mine. You can't stop Fate any more than you can the tide."

Lupin put a hand up to cover his shocked, troubled expression. Ginny gasped and took a couple of steps back.

"Fated?" Mrs. Granger asked.

"What did you say?" Hermione asked.

Harry turned to her. "We're Fated. You know it's true."

"It...it can't possibly be..." She looked confused, frightened. A fresh stream of tears poured down the sides of her face. She looked at Ron but he turned away. She was no longer a friend, either.

Harry didn't waver. He took her hand. "It's true, Hermione. I feel it so I know you must."

"Tell her why," Ron commanded in a low and gravelly voice. "Tell her how she and I were Fated. Tell her how Draco hexed her with that curse, and how I tried to save her but I couldn't because I was already her True Love. I was the one the Fates meant her to have. Me! Tell her, Harry, how you kissed her and stole her from me! Tell her!" His breath was labored, ragged, and the hole at his center burn like an inferno. He shook from the effort of standing still.

"I was cursed?" she asked. "How could you keep this a secret from me? Both of you!" She rushed past them and fled up the stairs. There were a handful of moments when nobody moved.

"Shall we retire into the parlor?" Lupin asked. He began to herd people in that direction. "Tonks," he said quietly, and then motion to the stairs with his chin. She nodded, and followed Hermione up.

Everyone else wandered shell-shocked into the parlor, except for Ginny who wore an expression of betrayal as she watched Harry leave her behind. Ron knew that look, understood that feeling all-too-well. Hermione had been her great friend, and Harry her first love. If Ron hadn't already been over his head in raw emotion he might've tried to console her some. But then, she did something completely unexpected. Ginny wiped away the tear that had fallen along her straight nose, then raised her chin and stomped up to the dinning room. From where he stood Ron heard her disappear through the Floo Network after two words: "the Burrow."

Lupin's voice drifted down from upstairs, but Ron still hadn't moved. Every part of him was disconnected, his mind, his body, his anger.

"This is disastrous," Lupin began. "And I don't just mean to your friendships, Harry. The Order needs you, and we need Ron. The two of you have to be able to work together. It's crucial."

"We can," Harry said. Ron didn't think even Harry believed that sorry assertion.

"When you said True Love..." Mrs. Granger said slowly.

"He's talking about the Fates, dear," Ron's mum said. "Every once in a good long while the Fates intervene and cast their mark on destiny. Surely you've heard of True Love?"

"Yes, but what does that mean?" Mr. Granger asked, frustrated.

Harry spoke up. "It means I Love her. And she Loves me. And whether you like it or not, even Muggle law says she's an adult now. She can make her own decisions."

"Like hell she can! If you think for one moment that I'm going to leave my teenage daughter in this - whatever this place is! - with you, you little bugger, you're out of your bloody mind!"

"Clive," Mrs. Granger said with sternness to her tone that sounded suspiciously like Hermione's.

"Shelia, I will handle this," he insisted through a clenched jaw. "And you, Mr. Lupin, assured me that the children would be appropriately supervised!"

Posturing. Ron shook his head. Hermione was upstairs crying her eyes out and everyone was standing around defending their territory like a bunch of animals. Ron left the hall and went upstairs to his room, allowing only a glance at Hermione's closed door.

He had to get out of there. There was simply no other choice to make. He'd gotten rid of the boxes and satchels and bags he'd used to move his things in, and looking around, there's wasn't really that much he'd need to take. Best to go simple, he thought. To be a wizard free of place and things. He pulled some clothes from the closet and wrapped them in the top blanket on the bed. He already had his wand in his pocket. Well, that hadn't taken long, had it? The rest of it, he assumed would eventually be swallowed up by the old house and disappear into the ether; the games, the music box and ear clip, the knick-knacks and trinkets and amusements from his childhood that seemed silly now. Good riddance.

He collapsed on to the side of the bed and cradled his head in his hands. It felt like his mind was melting in his hot, throbbing skull.

So, they'd been going at it all along, and Ron living just a couple of meters away hadn't cottoned on. He really was as dense as people always said he was. Blind was a better word. Well, he'd asked them to keep it a secret, so it's not like he could really blame them. Except that he did. They had done this. They had broken up the team, ruined their friendships, and destroyed him completely.

No, not completely. Ron had a job, so technically he had a means of sustaining himself. He could still go on. There didn't seem much point, but there it was.

"You're leaving?" She was in the doorway, her voice still watery. He didn't look at her. Didn't even acknowledge she was there. "Do you have to?" When he snorted she sighed. "Well, does it have to be tonight? We need to work this out, Ron-

"Don't! Don't say my name like that!"

Her red, puffy eyes went wide. "Like what?"

"Like you care!"

"But Ron, of course I care. I'll always care about you. You're my best friend."

"No," he said quietly. "Not anymore. Never again."

"Don't say that." She crossed the room and sat beside him. "Why didn't you tell me?"

That was a good question. He thought back and couldn't seem to come up with an answer. "Would it have made any difference?"

"I don't know. I don't know anything anymore." She sniffed back a sob and wiped her cheek with the back of her delicate hand. "God! I can't believe this is happening!"

His heart wrenched in his chest at her cry, and the hatred and fury inside quieted a little. Perhaps it didn't matter that she'd slept with Harry. It didn't even matter that she Loved him. This was still Hermione sitting next to him. Ron pulled the small etched box from the drawer in his night table and handed it to her. "Happy birthday, Hermione."

She choked on a sob as he placed the gift in her hand. "It'll be all right," he told her.

She laughed and cried at once. "How can you say that? How could things possibly be all right?"

"I'm going away," he explained. "You're still Fated, so you have a Love. You have the Order. You'll forget about me in no time, and you and Harry will defeat You-Know-Who, and everything will be fine."

"Where are you going?" Funny that she would cling to that part.

"No where special. To the Burrow, I expect. Until I can clear out the flat above the store. But you don't have to worry. I'll steer clear. You're Harry's now. I get it."

She scowled. "I'm not Harry's. I'm not a thing. And does this mean you're firing me?"

"Firing? You can't be serious."

"I most certainly am. I've put a lot of work into that store. A lot of time and energy and emotional investment."

He stared at her in disbelief. She was heartless. "You're talking to me about emotional investment? You'd force me to spend all day with you, every day, knowing how I feel about you and what we once were, and with you going home at night to your True Love while I slink back up to my empty flat? You cold-blooded, selfish trollop!"

"You're calling me selfish? Have you even once looked in the mirror?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"That this is all about you, and how much you've been hurt. About what's been done to you! Never mind that there are two other people directly affected by this curse - and yes, we were cursed, it's not like we wanted to be Fated together-"

"Two other people? You mean the two people in your bed?"

She slapped him hard against his cheek bone and his head whipped back. Not that he could blame her. He deserved it. But he grabbed her by the upper arms anyway; a knee-jerk reaction.

"You should've told me!" she screamed and cried, tears flowing again, her face red and strained and crumpled. "Damn you, Ron Weasley! You should've told me!"

What was left inside him twisted and pulled, and his own face went hot. Tears flowed. And then he kissed her. He bowed his head and pressed his mouth against hers. Masochist, he called himself in his head. Bloody stupid sod.

Until, that is, her lips moved beneath his, and she kissed him back. Something hot and electric bolted through him, his entire body tingled with a sensation he'd never quite experienced before. His hands went to her face, and he cradled her head. Her mouth opened and her tongue quickly found his. Immediately a ball of excitement shot from the base of his belly to, well, lower. He groaned with arousal. She was amazing; her lips, her hands on his chest, her warm, moist breath in his mouth. He ignored the emptiness inside him that cried foul. He wanted more of her and he didn't care about the rest of it. Her finger tips explored down the sides of his ribcage, and then to his abdomen muscles that triggered another amazing jolt of excitement. He couldn't help it, couldn't control himself; his mouth kissed and kissed and his hands had to touch her. They slid down her neck, her back, to that gentle dip at the base of her spine he'd held in his fantasies for weeks now. His fingers slipped under her shirt and then behind the waistband of her jeans. She was warm and smooth as silk, just like he'd always imagined she would be.

Without warning she pulled away, wrenched herself from his arms, and she practically flew across the room putting the heavy bed between them. She was as breathless as he was; her mouth red and swollen to match her eyes. She was a mess, and never had she looked more lovely. Or more scared.

She threw the box on the bed, and pressed her hands over her offending lips. A new, gut-wrenching sob erupted. Her eyes held nothing but tears and anguish. "What is wrong with me?"

"That's what I'd like to know." Harry stood in the doorway, wand in his fist, all color gone from his hardened face.

"Oh, no," she muttered, now visibly shaking. She regretted kissing him, Ron knew. She wanted to take it back, and even while he loved her it made him hate her even more. Without saying a word she was choosing Harry. She Loved Harry. Harry Effing Potter.

"Get out of my house." Harry's voice was low and dangerous, foreign from the boy Ron had known all these years. "Get out. And take her with you."

It was sometime around dawn when Hermione finally stopped crying and fell asleep. Ron had listened to her weep all night, impotent to do anything else from the narrow twin bed in his Burrow room. Ginny's old room was two landings down, and that's where Ron's mum had tried to make her comfortable. Hermione had been inconsolable.

Lying flat on his back, Ron measured exactly one hand width between his body and the edges of the mattress. The light in the room was an orangish-red and poured in from the curtained window over his bed, just as it always had when he'd found himself up at some unnatural hour of the morning. And still, the bed was smaller than he remembered. Ridiculously small. No man should have to sleep in a bed where his feet hung off the end, and where he faced the very real possibility of rolling over and waking on the floor. It was indecent.

As was the tattler his parents had put above his door. He glared at it, but it watched silently, not caring. It was meant to be a deterrent for Hermione and him; she couldn't step foot in his room without it sounding, and an identical one hung above her door. No privacy meant no torrid love affair, apparently. Never mind her complete emotional breakdown. Never mind that she was Fated to Harry. Never mind that he hated her as much as he loved her. Honestly, what were his parents thinking? Indecent.

It was easy to think of indecencies as one watched the sun rise over the horizon. For instance, Hermione had come back to the Burrow instead of going to her parents' house. Even after they were caught snogging by her True Love, with whom everyone now knew she'd been bedding. She most certainly was a trollop, Ron decided. It didn't make him not want to kiss her again or anything. It was just a

realization. One would think that he'd be thrilled that she was at the Burrow, actually. One would think, yes, but one would be wrong. This just made matters worse. She hadn't come because she'd chosen him, because she loved him. Ron wasn't that delusional. For Hermione, it had been a question of going back to the Muggle world with the very real threat of never returning, or finding a safe place to land in the magical world for a while until either the storm blew past, or carried her away completely.

So, it was no real surprise when she didn't make it down for breakfast. Very little was said between Ron and his parents during that meal. There was an awkwardness between the three of them that had never been there before. Ron knew his father was upset both at Ron, and himself for not seeing the signs sooner and intervening. After all, the entire Order was directly affected, and Arthur had taken an oath to protect it. As had they all.

That was an interesting twist in Ron's already miserable, guilty existence. He had given an oath to the Order. Would he continue to honor it? Could he allow Harry to continue to take and take from him? Would Harry even agree to? It was difficult to say at this point, and Ron was mildly interested to know what he and Harry would do.

Rather than stay at home, Ron decided to head out to the shop. It was his job, after all, and if Hermione was going to lock herself in Ginny's room all day, someone had to be responsible to the business. Besides, he couldn't remember if they had decided she was actually fired or not.

Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes was swamped, and it was all that Ron could do to keep ringing people up all day long. By closing time the shelves were nearly empty and in complete disarray, and the rest of the place looked like a cyclone had hit it. Ron spent another couple of hours setting everything right, anything to avoid going back to the Burrow. He even spent some time in the flat above the store trying to figure out how much time and money it would take to make the place livable. It seemed more effort than he was able to muster at the moment.

Supper was hot and on the table when he got home, a wonderful change from his recent domestic norm. Ron's father and mother sat waiting for him, both with solemn expressions on their faces.

"How was your day, dear?" asked his mum, as he slid onto the bench beside him at the table. She passed him a bowl of potatoes.

"Fine," he told her. The potatoes smelled and looked wonderful, and he put a spoonful on his plate. His stomach was still in knots, though, and he doubted he'd be able to get them down. "She still up there?"

"Haven't heard so much as a peep all day. Your father and I thought we'd give her some time, but now I'm beginning to worry."

"Maybe you should check on her then," Ron suggested. "She'd take to seeing you better than me, I'd imagine."

"Maybe you're right, Ron. I'll take her up a plate." She pulled her wand from her apron and waved a plate from the cupboard, then began filling it.

"Have you thought, son," Ron's dad began in a quiet and careful voice, "how you're going to right this?"

"Me?"

"This is Harry and Hermione we're talking about, Ron. The two people who mean the most to you, I daresay even more than your mother and I. Which is as it should be," Arthur added quickly. "The question is, how are you going to right this? The three of you can't go on indefinitely in a Lover's triangle. There must be some resolution."

"Could we not describe the three of us as Lovers? Honestly!"

"Exactly my point. You're not ready for this," Arthur concluded. "Any of this. You're only seventeen!"

"Not now," Ron's mum said quietly. "Leave the lad alone, dear." Ron's dad relented and stuffed a chunk of meat in his mouth. "Now, Ron, eat something," she prodded before going up the stairs.

Ron sighed and popped a piece of cooked carrot in his mouth. It tasted amazing, better than he remembered his mother's cooking to be, but he still had trouble chewing and then swallowing. It was as if he was already so full of emotion that there simply wasn't room in his stomach for anything more solid. He tried the pumpkin juice that had been poured for him, and it went down a little easier.

A shrill scream rang through the house, and had both men on their feet and running up the stairs two and three at a time. Ron's mum stood in the doorway of her daughter's room, the plate and food in pieces at her feet.

"What is it?" Arthur demanded. He pushed past her and into the tiny room. It was empty. And over the teen posters and Hogwarts pennant on the wall was a skull swallowing a snake, drawn in blood.

Hermione was gone.

End of chapter 6

Chapter 7 – Righting Wrongs, Fighting Regrets

They were in Harry's kitchen - Ron and Harry and about fifty of their closest friends. An emergency meeting of the Order had been called, and naturally everyone responded to the call; a fellow member of the Order was missing, presumably taken by someone connected to You-Know-Who. The Dark Mark on Ginny's wall had been crude, but unmistakable.

Harry sat across the room from Ron, slumped in his chair with his face drawn and vacant. Most of the sad and sympathetic glances were directed to Harry. Word had got out, it seemed, about his great Love. Though, really, it shouldn't have been a surprise. In addition to Neville and Luna, Hagrid had been at Hermione's party the previous night to witness their revelations and subsequent downfall. And as good a friend as Hagrid was – and he was the best – the half-giant couldn't keep a secret to save his life. Their story would probably be front page news in the Daily Prophet by tomorrow morning, which, Ron reasoned, might not be such a bad idea. If people knew Hermione was missing, they'd be more likely to call the authorities if they saw her.

Shacklebolt opened the meeting. He'd been the first Order member to arrive at the Weasleys' home after Hermione was discovered missing, and had immediately taken charge. He was quickly followed by Lupin and then Moody, who secured the house and conducted a detailed search for clues inside and out. It had also been Moody who'd been sent to break the news to Harry. Ron couldn't even imagine how that conversation might've gone.

"One of our own was taken from us," Shacklebolt said. "Hermione Granger was abducted from the Weasley home some time between nine last night and eight this evening. Thank you all for coming so promptly."

The wizard went into detail where he could, but as he told the story it was clear to everyone in the room that the only real clue they had to her whereabouts was the Dark Mark drawn in the victim's blood. Hermione's blood. Hermione was a victim.

The room divided into teams, and a canvas of known Death Eater haunts was planned. The Order would collect intelligence from reliable sources and place as many suspected Death Eaters under surveillance as possible.

"But why Hermione?" asked Dedalus Diggle, wearing his signature purple. "What possible good could she be to the Death Eaters? She's just a child."

Hardly a child, Ron growled in his head. She was old enough to have seen real battle – which was more than Diggle was likely to ever face in his velvet-covered life. Bloody git.

Shacklebolt cleared his throat. "As I'm sure some of you are aware, if you read the Daily Prophet at any rate, Miss Granger and Mr. Potter have become very close as of late. The current reasoning is that she was taken to get to him. Possibly to lay some sort of trap."

The room erupted in whispers of shock and outrage. Harry didn't seem to notice.

"I heard there was an...altercation. Are we quite certain Miss Granger isn't pulling some sort of stunt?" This from a well-dressed, slender wizard with a long mustache. "Perhaps she and Mr. Weasley, the younger, cooked up this little scheme in retaliation? Or perhaps Mr. Weasley, the younger, took matters into his own hands, passion having got the better of him—"

Ron glared at the man, furious that that could even be suggested. Harry closed his eyes against the thought.

"We found her wand snapped in two. I assure you—" Shocked gasps filtered through the room at this newest bit of information, and Shacklebolt had to begin again. "I assure you that she was most certainly taken, and under duress by someone following You-Know-Who. The questions on the table now are, where is Miss Granger and how will we get her back?"

"Have her parents been notified? They're Muggles, are they not?"

Lupin stood up and turned to address the room. "I spoke to them myself," he said. Ron was bowled over by how pale and sickly he looked: a radical change from the day before. He reckoned they must be coming up on a full moon.

"They are understandably shocked and upset," Lupin continued. Ron realized with some surprise that Tonks was sitting beside Lupin. He hadn't recognized her with her hair a dark, blood red and straight down past her shoulders. She wore no makeup and looked nearly as haggard as Lupin.

Ron leaned forward, his head in his hands. If only he'd checked on Hermione that morning before he went to work. If only he'd insisted she go with him to the shop. If only he hadn't kissed her, then Harry never would've chucked her out of the manse, and chances were that with all the wards and magic protecting number 12, Hermione would still be safe. In Harry's bed, yes, but safe.

Why had he even kissed her? What had prompted it? Insanity was his first thought, but then he remembered what she'd accused him of just moments before. He was selfish. He'd kissed her because of his own selfishness. She'd been right. She was always right. He hadn't considered the situation from her point of view, or from Harry's, for that matter. Ron's world revolved around Ron, and damn everyone else. Selfish, pathetic git that he was.

The meeting broke, and Ron realized he'd been lost in his self-loathing for a while. He caught Shacklebolt by the sleeve. "What do you want me to do?"

"Go home," Shacklebolt told him. "Stay out of trouble."

"What? But...I'm a Smisurato! I can help."

"Ron." It was Harry. He stood by the door and motioned for Ron to follow.

They went up the stairs to the first of the bedrooms, which happened to be Ron's old room. Nothing had changed in the room, and yet it felt

so very different. It felt like a stranger's room. Harry shut the door behind them.

"Think, Ron. Who knew that she and I were involved?"

"What?"

"Suspects. We don't have time for the Order to survey the whole of the Death Eater army. We have to get her back now! She's counting on us. So who did this? Who knew she and I were together?"

"Not me," Ron darkly quipped. "And why do you assume this is all about you? Selfish git."

Harry's thick brows lowered. "Are you going to help me find her or not?"

"I am!" Ron said quickly. He hated having to work with Harry, having to collaborate when he was still so very angry. But Harry was right. Hermione was more important.

"So who? Lupin and Moody both warned us to behave as gentlemen, so they had at least an inkling."

"Then so did my dad, probably. Well, and Tonks. She and Hermione talked about that kiss you laid on her in the dining room."

Harry bit his lip. "Then more recently, there was Neville and Luna and Hagrid, so we can assume most of Hogwarts knows."

"Right," Ron agreed. He'd already thought of that. "But who at Hogwarts would kidnap Hermione?"

"There's someone else," Harry said grimly. "Someone we should've considered right from the beginning. Someone who wears that Dark Mark on his arm."

Realization turned Ron's blood cold, and his heart skipped a beat. It was true. There was only one suspect with the prior knowledge and

the motive to take Hermione. So, he wasn't dead after all, and Ron wasn't a murderer.

"Draco."

That reasoned, the two of them considered where he might be holding her. It had to be somewhere Ron and Harry would guess, because, they decided, the only motivation for Draco to take Hermione was ransom. And the only thing they could reasonably assume he wanted was the Cup of Oaths. Which meant, following their logic, Draco had most likely abducted Hermione from the Weasleys' house and forced her to the Cave of Regret hoping that Ron would be able to put the pieces together and bring him the Cup of Oaths.

"But I don't have the Cup," Ron said.

"Yes, but Draco doesn't know that. He just woke up, probably with a splitting headache, and found you and Hermione gone."

"Right, then," said Ron, and he headed for the kitchen.

"Where are you going?" Harry asked.

"To catch the others before they Apparate away."

"We don't need the others," Harry told him. "I've got you and my wand. We're good."

The Cave of Regret was located on an island known by modern Muggles as Chicken Rock, just south of the Calf of Man, which was south of the Isle of Man. To the magical world the hunk of stone and earth was called the Weeping Rock for reasons that legend failed to properly describe. There was a small lighthouse here, now Muggle automated, and miles and miles of sea. It was in the southern part of this isolated island that a small entrance in the rocks opened into a large underground cavern. And it was to this breach that Ron and Harry Apparated.

The wind whipped at their hair, tugged their clothes. Here, even a September night was brutally cold. Ron lit his wand and then crawled through the small opening first. About ten meters in and down, the crawlspace opened up dramatically, and Ron was able to stand. He brushed off his knees and then helped Harry to his feet.

"Yup. This is the place," Ron said. "I think I went down over there, and then there's a bend and some natural steps."

They followed the cavern, careful of loose rocks and puddles that were deeper than they appeared. Quartz glistened on the cave walls, reflecting the light from their wands. Stalactites and stalagmites created obstacles they had to negotiate and shadows that moved as they did through the space.

A tortured scream pierced the near silence and then echoed through the cavern. Hermione was there! The boys broke into a run down the uneven stones that led farther into the earth. She screamed again, and as the two of them jumped down the last few boulders to the sandy floor, they saw Malfoy with his wand out straight, pointed at Hermione, who was bound and gagged and twisting herself up in agony on the ground.

Harry went for Draco and Ron for Hermione, but before either of them could really react, Draco had Harry disarmed and on the ground and his wand pointed at Ron. Draco had been waiting for them, just as they'd suspected.

"Don't try it, Weasel. I've learned a lot since last we met. Don't push me into something you'll regret." His usually white-blond hair was dark with grease and grime. His face and clothes looked as if they hadn't been washed in a while. Possibly, Ron thought, since he last saw him.

"Where's the Cup?" Draco demanded.

"We don't have it. I never found it."

Draco didn't seem overly surprised. "Too bad for her," he said casually. "It's been a while since she last had food. Or something to drink."

"Let her go, Draco," Harry said stiffly, pushing himself up from his seat on the ground. "It's me you want."

Draco smirked. "I don't want you, Potter, as wonderfully egomaniacal as that is. I want the Cup."

"But we don't have it," Ron insisted.

"Then you'd better correct that little problem, because I've got your friend, here, in some Ties That Bind – a useful product made by the illustrious Weasley brothers, so I think you're familiar with it. She can't get away, and you can't let her go, and if anything happens to me they'll twist so tight she'll lose both her hands and feet before the rope around her neck tightens enough to take her filthy Muggle head off."

"There's a safeguard," Ron said. "Don't believe him, Harry."

"Oh, do believe me, Harry, when I say I've removed any magical safeguards that were once on the ropes. I have her, and I'm going to keep her, without food or water, until you bring me the Cup or she dies, whichever ever comes first."

On the floor, on her side and facing away from them, Hermione whimpered a hopeless sound.

"That's right, sweetheart," Draco cooed without taking his eyes from Ron and Harry. "Your boyfriends are going to leave you now. You'll have to wait a little longer for that rescue you were so certain of." He motioned to a small gap in the cavern wall with his sharp chin. "Through there."

"No way!" Ron shouted. "I'm not leaving her here defenseless against you!"

"No Cruciatus Curse," Harry said. "Swear it!"

"Like his word is worth anything," Ron said. "He wants the Cup to get out of a Blood Oath he made!"

"Swear," Harry repeated, "or we won't leave her. We'll get you the Cup, so long as you let her go, and you don't hurt her anymore."

Draco's eyes narrowed. Ron was shocked to see he was actually considering Harry's bargain. "Bring me the Cup, and you can have Granger, as is. No more Crucio. Don't bring me the Cup, and I'll have to reconsider."

"Hermione!" Harry called. "We'll be back soon. I promise!"

Her shoulders began to shake, but she didn't make a sound as she cried.

"Come on," Harry mumbled quietly to Ron, who was moments away from losing it completely and blasting Draco into oblivion.

"But—" Ron argued in a whisper.

"Got any better ideas?" Harry asked under his breath.

"We can't leave her," Ron whispered back.

"We can't win this here, Ron."

Ron knew he was right, and still, it broke his heart to leave her lying there, sobbing quietly to herself, trusting them to help her out of this horrible mess. She trusted them: Harry, who had kicked her out, and Ron, who told her she was no longer a friend.

He should've killed Draco when he had the chance.

The crevice in the wall was narrow, and it forced the boys in single-file, sideways. Harry led the way this time, and Ron kept his wand up just in case Draco thought to jump them from behind.

"I think...I think there's a chamber or something up here. I can hear water trickling," Harry said. "Why is this place called the Cave of

Regret? Your dad said something about the Cup being well protected. You wouldn't happen to know what's in store for us, would you?"

"Not a clue," Ron admitted.

Harry stopped and looked back at his friend. "And you were coming in after the Cup alone? Hermione's right, you are off your rocker."

"Focus," Ron reminded him, and he gestured ahead.

The cramped little crevice opened into a larger tunnel that led steadily downward until it split off, one corridor to the left and one straight ahead. The boys hesitated, peering down into the darkness of both choices.

"We could split up," Ron suggested.

"Straight on," Harry decided. "Together."

The air got cooler and wetter the farther down they went, and the ceiling flattened out and lowered until they had to walk hunched over. Ron's stomach grumbled unhappily to remind him it had been all day since he'd last eaten.

Water began to seep from the walls and drip from the ceiling, and finally they came to an unnatural, circular room cut directly from the rock. In the center of the chamber, on a pedestal, sat a plain, clear wine glass.

"That's the Cup of Oaths?" Ron asked. It was supremely unimpressive.

"This isn't right," Harry said. "It's too easy."

"Or," Ron said, wanting it to be just that easy, "maybe that's what we're supposed to think. Let's just get the Cup and go."

"Ron! Your dad said the Cup is well guarded. Does that look guarded to you?"

"Maybe there's a magical field or something," Ron suggested. He reached out to take the Cup, and sure enough a blast of energy slammed him back against the room's smooth rock wall. His head began to ring, his vision went black at the edges, and he saw very clearly in front of him Gretta Sweet, the thick-waisted girl from Hogwarts that he used to tease in third and fourth year. She looked just as he remembered her, and she was crying. He'd made her cry. He didn't know why he'd done it, why he'd made the nasty remarks when he knew she could hear them, or snuffed her attempts to be friendly with him. He couldn't remember anything that would justify hurting her, but hurt her he had, and on purpose. And if memory served, at the time he'd been a little proud of his accomplishment. He'd bragged to Seamus, and the two of them had shared a good laugh over Gretta the Cow.

A heavy lump of grief and regret formed in Ron's throat, and he tried to swallow it down. "Oh, bloody hell," he said.

"So that's your method of deducing whether there's a defense system or not?" Harry asked, pulling him up by one arm. "You just try and trigger it?"

"Gretta, I'm sorry."

"Gretta? Calling me names now? Stupid berk," Harry grumbled. "Forget it. Let's just get the--"

And even after Ron had made her cry, never once had she tried to retaliate. She'd been such a sweet girl. Blonde. His heart broke for her. Shame swelled in him, and disgust. "I'll make it up to you," Ron said.

"Forget it," Harry barked. "Let's just get the Cup and get Hermione out of here."

"Hermione," Ron said on an exhale, and his heart squeeze even more. The hole in his center twisted over itself. "I did this to her. It's all my fault. Harry, you've got to believe me: I was the one who kissed her. She isn't to be blamed. It was all me, and I'm sorry. I'm so bloody sorry. I love her, Harry. I never stopped. I tried to stop, but I couldn't.

And I kissed her, and she chose you over me – but of course she did. She's Fated to you. She Loves you. How could she not? I'm so bloody sorry! I'm sorry for everything. For looking at her breasts and touching her back.... I'm a sad sack, really I am. I thought about her tatties–"

"Stop talking!" Harry clamped a hand over Ron's mouth, but even muffled, he kept apologizing. He couldn't stop. His lament felt bottomless. Grief overwhelmed him.

"This is the defense," Harry tried to explain. "Or at least part of it. Just shut up, will you?"

"She wouldn't be here if I hadn't kissed her!" Ron gasped, breaking free from Harry's hands.

"Get a hold of yourself!"

Suddenly Harry was off him and thrown across the room, and Ron realized that they weren't alone. A hooded figure dressed in green robes towered over them, more solid than a dementor, and scarier than Death himself. The figure lowered a pale, boney hand at Ron and a bolt of dark green magic shot him in the chest. His eyes rolled back in his head, and everything went completely black.

When Ron came round it was partially because Harry tripped over him. He groaned, and Harry yelled frantically to him. "Ron! Help! I need your help! Wake up!"

Two dark creatures were now chasing Harry, shooting bolts of magic at him, over and over. The walls were singed from missed strikes. Not all had missed, though. Harry was sweating, panting, and burned badly in several places. Ron's right hand went protectively to his own burned chest, and he groaned in pain.

"Quickly, Ron!" Harry urged.

The room was starting to settle a little, and Ron found his wand not far from where his hand had fallen. He lifted it, pointed at the two cloaked figures, and then shut one eye to eliminate one of them. That

was better. Two against one in Ron and Harry's favor. No problem. But he repeatedly missed. The figure just wouldn't stay put.

Harry made it around the chamber to Ron again, dove for him, and slid up beside him on the stone floor. "Your hand!" Harry insisted, and gripped Ron's fist. "Open it!"

The figure came at them, tall and terrifying. Ron tightly clasped Harry's hand. Instantly he felt the familiar cold at the center of his being as Harry began to siphon off his magic. Ron reached down like Moody had taught him and pulled that cold up, letting Harry take as much or as little as he needed, without forcing any extra on him. A blast of energy erupted from Harry's wand, and it pushed the creature back a few paces. Harry shot it again, and again, in rapid succession. Their attacker didn't have time to aim. Their link churned the air around them, whirling sand and dust. It scoured their faces, hands, anything exposed. Ron had to close his eyes, but he kept a constant stream to his friend – no, not his friend, he corrected himself, and a new wave of regret cut through him like a blade.

Harry cried out. "What are you doing?" His attack wavered; the sounds of his blasts hitting the creature became erratic. "What is that? Is that you?"

Guilt washed through Ron. "I'm sorry," he whispered over and over, not knowing if Harry was able to hear him.

"Ron, can you cast and maintain our link?" Harry's voice was muffled by his spells and the storm.

Ron lifted his wand and called out, "Evanescio!" He missed, and a plume of purple sparkles bounced off the central altar. It promptly disappeared, and the Cup crashed to the cavern floor and shattered. The green figure instantly evaporated, and the room went still and dark. Ron hadn't even noticed the Cup had radiated its own light. Now that he was sitting in the dark, of course, it was blatantly obvious.

He felt Harry beside him, heard his labored breath and a small, pained whimper. Ron said his name, but Harry didn't respond. With a flick of Ron's wand and the word "Lumos," a small light pierced the

darkness. Harry lay on one hip against him, covered in sand and sweat. Tears tracked their way down his face. His glasses were hopelessly scratched from the scouring they'd taken. Harry clutched his chest.

"Harry?" Ron didn't know what to do. Should he Apparate Harry out of there? Could he even do it? He'd never attempted a side-along before, and they were deep under stone and ground, and possibly sea. What about Hermione? The Cup was in pieces; what would Malfoy do when he discovered that?

"There's so much pain," Harry gasped out, his eyes screwed shut. "And emptiness, and regret. Ron? Is this you? Is this emptiness from you? It's trying to swallow me whole."

Ron realized they were still touching, and he inched away, remembering suddenly what Moody had said. Harry passed out.

"Sorry about that," he solemnly said. He hadn't meant to send anything through their link except the magic. He'd lost control again, and Harry had suffered because of it. The word "regret" wasn't prolific enough to describe the sense of loss and anguish he held. Regret for Harry and Hermione, for Greta Sweet and the other thousands of things he'd done in his life that he was less than proud of. He looked around the chamber, thinking to himself that some powerful magic must be invested there if it was able to dig into his thoughts and pull out his most retched moments – many of which he'd forgotten all together – and then force him to relive them.

The torture of those moments, however, was dulled now that the Cup was broken and the Cave's Protective Spells rendered void. Ron wiped his own face with his sleeve and tried to focus on what to do next. He needed to rouse Harry without touching him.

"Ennervate!" he said, his wand extended. Harry twitched on the floor, but didn't wake. Harry was too depleted, Ron decided, and it would be hours before he would recover enough on his own. Unless, Ron considered, he could gently prod Harry awake with magic. Just a smidge. Enough to give him the energy he needed to regain

consciousness. Could he find that kind of control? Could he give just enough to wake Harry, but not enough to hurt him?

As he stood he remembered the scorched flesh and fabric in the center of his chest and chose to move more gingerly. Ron closed his eyes. His magic was there; he could feel it like a hum just beneath the surface. Generally he didn't pay it any mind, he was so accustomed to the sensation; it was so much a part of him. He reached down inside himself and willed the smallest amount up. And then he thought about Harry's magical well, now cold and spent, and Ron gave him a few precious drops. Harry moaned. Not enough, Ron thought. Just a little more. And this time, Harry opened his eyes.

"What happened?" he asked.

"I broke the Cup," Ron told him.

"You cast a Vanishing Spell, didn't you? That was brilliant," Harry said, groggy. He coughed.

"I broke the Cup," Ron repeated, thinking either Harry hadn't heard him or he was off his nut.

"At first I couldn't understand why you'd use a little charm like Evansesco on that creature," Harry said, pushing himself up. "Kinda like trying to stop a Bludger with a handkerchief."

"Er, Harry," Ron said. "I broke the Cup."

"Yeah! That's the best part! I wish I'd thought of it!" Harry made it to his feet, wobbled a little, and then picked up his wand. He took a few steps toward the Cup.

"Reparo!" he called, and the Cup pulled itself back together, shards, glass dust, and all. Then he turned his wand on his own glasses and repaired them as well.

"But," Ron objected. "But Harry! The Cup's been broken. Its magic is gone."

"Draco doesn't need to know that," Harry said with a wicked grin. "We just need to distract him long enough to get Hermione out of here." He bent over, grabbed the goblet, and rose with a hand to his head.

"Easy," Ron told him. "I'm still sending you a little energy. We need to finish this quick."

Harry nodded.

They made it back to the large cavern, though it took some doing. Harry had to repeatedly stop to catch his breath, and Ron didn't dare increase the flow he was already feeding him. Harry looked weak to Ron, and it made him nervous. They weren't out of danger yet.

Hermione was still on the floor when they emerged from the fissure. Draco sat on a large rock biting at his nails. He leapt up when he saw them.

"You got it!" he said, shocked and thrilled. "Give it here!"

"I've got the Cup," Harry agreed. "Now let her go."

"Not until I have the Cup."

"Let me put it this way," Harry said. "Either you release her now, or I drop this and we can fight about it afterwards."

"You drop that Cup, Potter, and it'll be the last thing you do!"

Harry smirked. "I think you have an idea of what we went through in there. Believe me when I say that your threats fall short of scaring me at this point. Now untie her, or Ron will dispatch you the way he did the green figure while I smash this Cup into so many pieces—"

"All right!" Draco sprung forward and pointed his wand at Hermione. Then he looked suspiciously at Ron. "You dispatched the green man?" His lip curled up in a snarl.

Ron lifted his wand with a slow, careful confidence. "Let. Her. Go."

Draco flicked his wrist, and a green mist flowed from his wand. Hermione's binds released – retracted into themselves until they disappeared altogether with a pop. She groaned, rolled onto her back, and Ron got the first glimpse of her face since he'd last seen her at the Burrow. Both he and Harry gasped.

Her right eye was swollen shut, and was black with bruising. Her left eye had a cut scored across her brow and lid that had bled thickly before it clotted. Her nose had been broken and leaned puffily off to one side; her cheek and mouth seemed a mass of contusions and lumps that were difficult to look at. Hermione's right hand was clearly broken. Her fingers were thick and bent at wrong angles. And, from what Ron could see of the gashes in her shirt and jeans, she had been similarly beaten over the rest of her body.

Ron ran to her, skidded to a stop on his knees, but hesitated to touch her. Where was she not hurt?

"Now, give me the Cup," Draco demanded with desperation in his voice.

It took Harry a moment to react. But then he turned to Draco with a terrible snarl and tossed the Cup. In the next second he raised his wand and, while the Cup was still in mid-air, blew it up.

"Nooooo!" Draco reached out to the shards.

Hermione seemed to finally notice Ron kneeling beside her, and she hurled herself into his arms, her own going tight around his neck. He hugged her to him, reassuring himself that no matter what she'd been through, she was alive.

Ron felt more of his magic drain, and a moment later a blast rang out behind them. Ron and Hermione turned to see Draco and Harry dueling, both firing dangerous spells. Ron allowed Harry to take what magic he needed as he helped Hermione to her feet. She clung to his shoulder, unable to steady herself, and he tucked an arm around her middle to hold her up.

Then, quick as lightening, she stole Ron's wand with her off hand and slammed Draco with a blood chilling, "CRUCIO!"

Draco dropped to the ground, screaming. The agony was clearly written on his face, in his tangled screams as he writhed. Harry lowered his own wand, seemingly all right to let Hermione have her revenge. Ron was not.

"It's an Unforgivable," Ron reminded her. "Hermione." He didn't have to speak loudly; her blood-caked ear was mere inches from his lips. "You need to stop."

A sob erupted from her cracked lips. She was still hurting. He needed to get her some help.

"Let her be," Harry said, not taking his eyes off the writhing Draco. "She deserves this."

"But she doesn't deserve what the Ministry will do when they find out."

Harry scoffed. "You think they even knew that he was torturing her with an Unforgivable? If they did, where are they?"

Ron ignored him. "Hermione," he said gently. A pink tear swelled in her left eye and then fell down her dirty face.

She thrust his wand even harder. "Avada ked-"

He couldn't let her kill him. Not when he knew what it felt like to kill a person. Not when he knew she'd end up in Azkaban with that horrible weight on her shoulders. Ron grabbed his wand away from her and pulled her tighter against himself. She crumbled against him and dissolved into tears.

Draco went limp. The cavern went silent.

"It's not supposed to be like this," Harry told him, his voice cracked. He was shaking, and Ron felt him drawing even more magic. "When I look at the two of you like that, after everything she's been through –

we've been through – I'm not supposed to hate you both." It was then that Ron realized Harry's hand was fisted tight around his shaking wand. The room was suddenly even more dangerous.

"Harry, mate, we've got to get her out of here."

"Hermione," Harry called, and she turned to him. His own face crumbled. "Oh, Hermione." Harry raised his wand at her, and Ron instantly stepped in front of her.

"What the bloody hell are you doing? Lower your wand, Harry!" Ron demanded. He knew if he needed to that he could simply cut off Harry's energy supply. It was the only way Ron would survive a duel with him.

"I have to fix this," Harry said. "I wasn't meant to Love you, Hermione. I'm sorry. So very, very sorry."

Ron narrowed his eyes. "What are you going to do to her?"

"Curse her again. Get out of the way."

"Nooo!" cried Hermione. She began to panic, and tried to burrow into Ron's back.

"Moody asked you once if you trusted me. Do you trust me, Hermione?"

"Harry! Don't!" Her words were muffled by Ron's shirt and her swollen mouth. "Don't!"

"Harry, there's got to be some other way."

"There's not," Harry told him. "Now move. At this moment in time I'd have no problem blowing you away, Ron. Love may not be love to you, but it's everything to me. Everything. And I remember every second of that kiss in your room and what it felt like to be betrayed by the two most important people in my life. Do you want your death on my conscience, as well? The two people I trusted most in this world. How could you?"

"I..." Ron didn't have the words to make the situation better.

"I Loved you, Hermione! And you Loved me! And you kissed...HIM!"

"Oh, Harry!" She left Ron's protection and stepped toward him. "I'm sorry! So sorry!"

"I Love you. Trust me," he whispered, and then thrust his wand directly at her heart. "Falsus amor FATUM!"

She screamed a ragged, emotion-filled scream. Then she collapsed, and had Ron not caught her she would've hit the ground hard.

"What are you waiting for?" Harry asked, his voice rough. "Kiss her." He turned his back on the both of them.

Ron looked down at the battered and bloody witch in his arms. Hermione. She was so different than the little girl he'd known so well at school; so changed. She'd hurt him like he'd never known she could, and still, he loved her. He didn't know how or why, but he knew that he did. It wasn't fair.

"Forgive me, Hermione," he whispered, and with the empty center of his soul screaming out, Ron ever so gently lowered his lips to her beaten mouth.

Somewhere behind him, he heard Harry's body hit the ground, felt the energy link between them dwindle and then stop. But Ron couldn't bring himself to consider that, because what was once a vast nothingness within him was now full to the brim, warm, tingling, and alive. Everything inside trembled with joy, with tremendous relief. He felt his soul mate not just as a girl in his arms, but as a very tangible part of him again, a part that never should've been severed.

He was whole.

"Thank you," he whispered to Harry. "Thank you," he whispered to the Fates.

End of chapter 7

End of Part I of False Fates by MD1016

Part II: Trial of the Century

Chapter 8 – The Shocking Truth

It wasn't long after they escaped the Cave of Regret that Ron sat in a bed at St. Mungo's. The burn on his chest had been worse than he originally thought; the real pain hadn't kicked in until they peeled his clothes off him, but the doctors had been able to heal the wound, even if he'd sport a fist-sized scar in the center of his chest for the rest of his life. Ron knew he was lucky. Harry had been hit not once, but dozens of times. Ron's mother told him that Harry was still very uncomfortable.

Hermione was a different story. The healers had knit the broken bones in her hand and nose, and righted the concussion she'd suffered. The rest of her injuries would heal with time, but it was the non-physical damage that worried Ron. His mum admitted that they had to give Hermione a strong sedative potion to allow her to rest without the threat of nightmares, and even then she didn't rest easy.

Hermione hadn't even been given a full day to recover before one Chancellor Bombridge of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement (a tall, bony man with over-developed ears and chin) loomed at the foot of her bed like a vulture and read the charges the Ministry had slapped on her: use of an Unforgivable Curse, intention to inflict bodily harm with an Unforgivable Curse, and most insulting of all, failure to report the use of an Unforgivable Curse by another - as if Hermione had been in any position to report that Malfoy was torturing her! Ron nearly jumped out of his hospital bed when Lupin had recounted the story to him, but he was assured by both Lupin and his father that Hermione would have her day in court. Surely two of the charges would be dropped, if not all three. Ron didn't find this comforting. If even one charge remained Hermione would be sentenced to Azkaban Prison. That was, after all, the only punishment for an Unforgivable.

"Mind if I join you?" It was his mother. He hadn't heard her come in. Her face was compassionate and open, as always, and she kissed her son on the forehead. "Your father said you'll still be here another night."

"Dad? Where is he?" He'd disappeared with Chancellor Bombridge hours before.

"He's with Hermione's parents. He'll bring them 'round later, I suppose. When she's up to visitors."

No one had been able to see her after Bombridge had gone. She'd been so upset that the healers had her visitation restricted. Lupin had been quick to assure Ron that it was temporary, and that Hermione would need her friends soon enough. Lupin didn't understand Hermione. She always needed her best mates.

Moody was in the hall. Ron caught glimpses of him as he patrolled in front of their rooms. Ron felt secure that if Draco was out for revenge, while they were at St. Mungo's at least, the three of them were safe enough.

Ron absently nodded, glancing at his wand on the table by his bed. Still there. "She's hurting, Mum. I need to see her. I need to help her."

"Perhaps you're not meant to. Some hurts have to heal on their own, dear. But Hermione's a strong girl, and I'm sure she'll find her way clear of this."

"Hmm."

"Do you want me to sit with you a while?" she asked.

"If you like. But you don't need to."

"I know I don't. But I think I will, all the same," she said. And after that they didn't have to talk for a great long while.

After much discussion and drama, it was finally decided that Hermione would go back to the Burrow, at least until her convalescence was over, where she would be chaperoned by Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. Ron was certain that this was allowed only because everyone (save the three of them) still believed Hermione to be Fated to Harry. Her parents - being Muggles and not understanding anything except that their daughter was in hospital

again, and worse for ware - wanted her home. They couldn't understand why she would choose to stay in the magical world after all that had happened, why she adamantly refused to go home. Lupin was quick to assured everyone that new security measures had been extended to the Burrow; new Guarding Spells, and wards against the Dark Arts. And besides, he explained to her parents, no one expected to hear from Malfoy again for a very, very long time. Ron, though, wasn't so sure. He didn't put it past Draco to seek out revenge at his earliest opportunity.

Two days later Hermione was deemed fit enough to leave hospital. Her bones had mended nicely and much of the facial swelling had receded. She still didn't look quite herself, but Ron thought that had a lot more to do with how quiet and removed she was from everything around her. The usually opinionated, vocal Hermione now sat quietly and often stared at nothing, as if she was somewhere else entirely.

That first night, however, instead of going straight to the Burrow they went to the manse. There was another Order meeting, and a large cake was produced to welcome their lost member home. She smiled and thanked people, but it was clear, at least to Ron, that she wasn't up to this kind of social interaction yet. Too many people, asking too many how-are-you-doing-dear's and giving her sad, understanding looks.

Harry was there, too, of course, and she cried when she saw him. He pulled her away from the on-lookers, and motioned to Ron to follow. The three of them went into the parlor and Harry closed the heavy sliding doors behind them with his wand.

"You all right?" he asked as he helped her to the couch. "Water? Zombini's Ale? Pumpkin juice?"

"I'm fine," she said. "It just hit me all of a sudden that I don't...I don't...feel for you..." She couldn't seem to get the words out.

"I know," Harry said, quietly. He sat next to her, and fidgeted with his hands. "I don't anymore, either."

They sat there for a moment, just smiling watery smiles at each other, and Ron felt odd man out; but where he'd gotten used to feeling jealous when the two of them were together, now he just felt out of place. "Maybe I should..." He motioned back to the kitchen.

"Actually, I'd like to...I think that we...that is, the three of us...we need to air some things out," Harry said, stumbling over his words. "Because the fact is that even though I don't...anymore...I still remember. And it's hard to...I don't know...separate the two, I guess. How I felt then, and what's happening now-"

Hermione gasped, and her eyes went wide. "Cripes! You've seen me naked!" She covered her blush with a hand.

"Uh...yeah." Harry looked away and played with his own shirt. "I know. It's weird. But I'm not sorry it happened, I mean, yeah, I'm sorry about all the pain and hurt and what you had to go through, Hermione, but I'm not sorry I got the chance to Love you. Even if it was just for a couple of weeks. I can't be sorry about that."

A couple of weeks? It had felt like a lifetime to Ron. "But you don't anymore," Ron said, wanting that bit of reassurance.

Harry gave him a lopsided grin. "No. I mean, I do love Hermione." He turned to her. "I do love you. But it's more of a best mate thing. Like before."

"Right," she said, and she cracked the first smile Ron had seen on her face in a very long time. "I feel exactly the same."

"Right." Harry looked expectantly between Hermione and Ron, then, but when nothing else was said, he changed the subject. "What are we going to do about Hermione's court date?"

"Nothing," she said.

"But you have to know we're not going to let you go to Azkaban," Harry said.

"It's none of your business," she told him. "I don't want you or Ron putting your necks out over something that I did."

"So...you're not going to do anything?" Ron asked. "You're just going to give up? Let them punish you for something he deserved?"

"Ron, I cast an Unforgivable. I have to deal with the consequences."

"But...Azkaban," Ron said.

She sighed and rolled her head against the back of the couch. "Honestly, you make me very tired, Ron."

She wasn't taking this seriously, she couldn't be. He watched her for a moment, tried to assess her mood. Her injuries, as far as her face went, were healing well. Bruises had gone from black to blue to a sickly greenish-yellow, and her mouth and cheek were the correct shape once again. There were still healing cuts, across her left eye and her lower lip for example, that were a dark brown against her paler-than-usual complexion. But what really struck him was the sunken look around her eyes. Were the sleeping potions not helping her rest after all? She did seem unusually exhausted. She should've stayed longer at St. Mungo's.

"Do you want to cut this party short? I mean, there's going to be an Order meeting, but I'm sure it'd be all right if you—"

"I'm fine. It's only seven o'clock," she said pragmatically.

Harry exchanged a worried glance with Ron. So, he saw it, too. And that moment of silent corroboration between the two of them felt better than the hot bubble bath he had in hospital.

They decided if they were going to stay, they might as well rejoin the party downstairs. Hermione excused herself to go to the loo. Harry watched her go, and raised a reflexive hand to clutch at his chest.

"Er...Ron. Before, in the cave," he said, "that emptiness I felt...that was you, wasn't it?"

"The hole. Yeah. That's what was left when Hermione was gone."

"It was horrible."

"Yeah. It's a great incentive to stay Fated."

"I just...just know, Ron, that I don't have that. That hole. I feel like I did before."

"That's good." It was something of a relief to know that Harry wouldn't have to live the way he had. "I'm glad."

Harry nodded. "We're going to be all right."

"I see that now."

Ron watched the clouds that night from his bedroom window as they drifted slowly across the stars and moon. He felt full and content, not just from the supper he didn't have to cook, but because everyone he loved was safe, and Hermione was upstairs asleep, and she was his.

It was late, and he was tired, and still sleep was illusive. His mind was full of what would come next. The shop would have to be doused with protective spells much like the Burrow. Their training with the Order would most certainly be stepped up now that Harry and Ron had proven themselves a battle-worthy team. A new search for Draco would need to begin (though this last one would more than likely fall to just Harry and him, and maybe Hermione) because Ron didn't trust him not to pop up at the worst possible moment. You-Know-Who still had Draco under his thumb, which meant that he potentially knew everything Draco knew, and Hermione might still be targeted to get to Harry.

Ron frowned. She wasn't up to being a target yet. The party and the meeting had worn her so completely out that Ron's mother had had to help her up the stairs and in to bed once they got home. Ron had begun to follow, but his mother had waved him away.

"A moment," his father had said as Ron watched Hermione and his mother disappear up the stairs. "Son, I'm not going to pretend to

know what you're going through, none of us can really know, I suppose. Your mother and I, though, we want you to know—"

"It's all right, Dad."

"It is?"

Ron had seen the concern in his father's expressive face. He was a loving man and an authority figure. All Ron's life his father had been a provider, a nurturer, a disciplinarian and a playmate. He was the kind of father Ron would want to be, if he was unlucky enough to ever have children.

"It is."

That exchange had been hours ago, and something about it bothered Ron still. He tried to tell himself that he hadn't told his father about him and Hermione being Fated again because it was none of his business, that it was personal, but that didn't seem quite right. Did he like the secret too much to tell? Or that he worried that they'd not let her stay so close if they knew?

A blood curdling scream shook him from that last thought, and instantly Ron was bounding down the stairs two at a time, wand in hand, heart pounding. He slammed Ginny's door open and tore into the room ready to confront whatever evil villain he might find. But the room was still and empty, and Hermione was in the corner between the foot of the bed and the wall huddled in a ball, screaming. Not the high-pitched girly scream one might expect, but a gut-wrenching cry of terror that stopped Ron's heart in his chest.

"Ronald WEASLEY!" yelled the tattler above the door. "Get out of this room at once!"

He crossed the room in two steps and knelt in front of Hermione, afraid to touch her. "Hermione," he cooed to her. "It's me. You're safe."

She shrank back from him, curled tighter.

"You're not supposed to be here, Ronald Weasley! Get out, get out at once!" the tattler rattled on.

Ron reached out and gently put a few fingers on her arm. "Hermione. It's all right. Wake up."

"Don't you touch – NOOOO! TOUCHING!" yelled the tattler. "TOUCHING! HELP, HELP! TOUCHING!"

"Help!" Hermione echoed, panic rising in her voice. "Help! Ron!"

"HELP! RONALD WEASLEY IS TOUCHING!"

"Help!" screamed Hermione. "Ron!"

Ron turned around, wand extended, and blew the tattler - and much of the wall it was attached to - apart. Then he pulled Hermione by the shoulders against himself. She was trembling, cold. "Wake up, love" he said quietly, calmly. "It's all right. I'm here. You can wake up now."

Her arms went around him, and small sobs bubbled out of her.

In the doorway his parents arrived wide-eyed and out of breath. They both saw the smoking remains above the door, but seemed more concerned about Hermione. Ron's dad, taking stock of the room and Ron holding a weeping Hermione, relaxed a bit. He put his wand away.

Ron placed a reassuring kiss on the top of her head, and rocked Hermione gently, smoothed her hair, all the things his mother had done for him when he was little to soothe his nightmares. In the corner Crookshanks watched with wide, mistrustful eyes.

"Ron?" Hermione said in a wet, hiccup-y voice.

"Hmm?"

"I need a wand. I've no way to protect myself."

"After the hearing," he promised. "We'll get you another wand."

She burrowed into his t-shirt and cried for a while longer.

He didn't notice them leave, but when Hermione finally cried herself out his parents were no longer waiting outside on the landing. Ron helped Hermione back into bed. He pulled the covers up, and gave her a reassuring smile. Then he tucked his wand inside her fist.

"Until you get your new one," he whispered. Then to his wand he said, "Protect her." A purple hue of magic netted itself over her hand. He left her to go back down to his room, but laid awake all night listening for more screams that he was thankful never came.

They breakfasted the next morning on muffins and coffee, and then Ron headed out to work. Hermione waved sadly to him as he left, but there was nothing either of them could do about it. She was Burrow-bound until her hearing, and as Ron's parents had personally vouched for her, she couldn't risk sneaking out. The only time she was allowed to leave the Weasley home was in the direct company of either Mr. or Mrs. Weasley, and then it had to be official Order business. Of course, the Order wasn't official, so technically she wasn't permitted out at all, but there was a wink and an understanding that allowed her the dispensation.

On his way out she asked: "Mind if I borrow Pigwidgeon?"

He shook his head. "Just give him a treat before you send him out," he reminded.

In Hogsmeade, the store's sign saw Ron coming from half way up the road, and began berating him on his failure to open the past four days. He ignored it, unlocked the shop, and opened the windows to let in some of the cool, early autumn air. The weather promised to be lovely all week; just blue sky with small fluffy clouds, and fresh breeze that played in his hair. Hogsmeade was a busy place in autumn with the visits from the newest classes from nearby Hogwarts.

Business was slow that first day back, which suited Ron just fine. Mostly he sat around and played with the new Flaming Fart drops (since the windows were already open). He did take five minutes,

though, to destroy their entire stock of Ties That Bind. That novelty line could burn for all he cared. When he saw his brothers next he'd speak to them about those "safe guards" they swore were in place.

The remainder of the day crawled by.

That night, with an escort from Mr. Weasley, they met at the manse for an evening of lessons. Lupin took Hermione down to the kitchen to see how her magic had fared her ordeal.

"Which means," Moody said from the parlor entry to Harry and Ron, "the three of us are going to be waist deep in learning how to follow the rules." There was a devilish grin on his face that left both Ron and Harry pale. "You think it's good sport to run off on your own back to the Cave of Regret, after specifically being told to stay put! The two of you want to play hero when young Hermione's life stands in the balance, eh?"

Moody was in a foul spirit, and he made them duel with him several times through out the evening, yelling, "Constant vigilance!" when they least expected it. Ron lost track of the number of times Moody flattened him against the ceiling, where he was then instructed to dust until the paint shined.

"What do you think would've happened if you'd gone to the Cave with a back up of ten Order members?" Moody demanded of Harry. "You think we would've allowed Hermione to be in the position she's in now? Forced to appear before the Ministry? Hmm? Do you? Do you think we would've allowed that little albino scum to escape the Azkaban sentence that's awaiting him?"

Ron had to admit Moody had a point there.

When the session was finally ended, Ron limped home. He ignored the dinner that was waiting for him on the table, and hobbled up to his bed to pass out.

Hermione had another nightmare that night, and Ron was there to help her through it. It was difficult to wake her, but he managed, and she ended up collapsed against him, solid and shaking. He held her close while she cried herself out.

At some point in the night, after she calmed down, the two of them whispered in the dark. She sat on the floor between his legs, one of her own draped over his right thigh with the other below it, and lying against him with her cheek against his chest. It was a position Ron would marvel at for weeks to come.

"I think I should find someplace else to live," she said quietly. Her arms were loose around his middle, sagging, really, she was so relaxed, and her fingers played lazily with the hem of his t-shirt. His body hummed with awareness of her. "Someplace where my dreams won't bother anyone else. I feel terrible that I woke you and your family."

His hands, clasped together, rested on her hip. He loved holding her like this; loved the feel of her weight against him, her voice low and soft. "I'm not bothered." That special place at the base of her back pressed warmly into the inside of his bent left leg. "At the moment I'd go so far as to say I'm the opposite of bothered. What would that be?"

She made a small, amused sound. "Comforted?"

"Content?" he asked.

"Are you, then? Or are you asking me?" One of her fingers found skin, and he jumped a little. Her hand was cold on his back. It made his lap twitch, and he panicked a little.

"Uh...uh...anyway, you can't leave," he reminded her. "At least not until your hearing."

She pushed away from him then. He tried to pull her back. "Stay," he whispered. He wanted the moment before back.

"Ron," she said, not at all in a whisper. "Am I here because you want me to be, or because it's the Ministry's decision that your parents take me in and vouch for me? Because I could just as easily have gone back to Kent and lived in my parents' house-"

"That's insane. Why would you go back to the Muggle world if you didn't have to?"

She pulled away completely and stood up. "I'm tired now," she said, in a voice that didn't sound in the least bit sleepy.

"Er...all right." Ron got up, and she climbed into bed. "I'll just..." He indicated out the door with his thumb.

She snapped, "Yes, you do that."

He backed out the door, and put a hand to the jamb, hoping that he would think of something new to say.

When she didn't respond he whispered a defeated "Good night," and went back down to his cold, lumpy bed where he lay awake for another hour or so trying to decipher what had gone wrong. She was touchy, he decided. He hoped she'd feel better in the morning.

But the week that followed was more of the same. Ron got up, went to work, went to lessons, and then collapsed into bed. Hermione continued to have nightmares, but as the time wore on she got better and better about waking herself up. She no longer allowed soothing when she surfaced into consciousness. Ron's role as protector and comforter was reduced to him standing outside the door and asking if she was all right. Invariably, she said she was.

On a Friday in late October, Lupin and Moody arrived at the breakfast hour looking somber. For a moment Ron thought they were there for eggs on toast and orange marmalade, but then he noticed that Hermione wore new robes over a frock shirt, and the almost green cast to her face. She hadn't touched her food. It could mean only one thing.

"Are you ready to go, Hermione?" Lupin asked sympathetically.

She stood up without speaking and smoothed out her fluffy hair.

How had Ron not known that today was her hearing? Why hadn't someone said something to him? Or had they? Surely he would've remembered something this important.

"We're going to Apparate there," Lupin told her. "We'll all be there with you the whole time, so there's nothing to worry about. Just tell the truth."

"But mention how that albino slug tortured the bloody hell out of you!" Moody insisted.

Lupin put up a hand to calm the larger man. "Her advocate is well-versed in the circumstances," he assured.

"Wait," Ron said, and then hurried up the stairs. Where had he put it? He pulled out the contents of his sock drawer, his small trunk, and peered into the crammed contents of his closet. Then he remembered and pulled out the small engraved wooden box from under his bed. He took the stairs three at a time. "Here."

She looked at the box, and then up into his eyes. Hers were so round and brown and sad. Did she recognize the box from before?

"Take it," he urged, and she did.

She opened the box and pulled out the luck charm he'd tried to give her for her birthday. It was about the size of her thumbnail, and she played with it for a moment. "It's lovely," she told him. "Thank you."

"Let me help you with that, dear," Ron's mum said, hopping up from the table. Hermione handed her the necklace and swept her hair aside. A lump formed in Ron's throat at the sight of her slim, smooth neck. His mother made approving sounds, and everyone gave small comments about how nice the charm looked. Except for Moody, of course, whose magical eye zeroed in on Ron as if to see through to his intentions.

"For luck," Ron said once Hermione had turned back to him.

She gave him a faint smile, kissed his cheek, and then turned to Lupin. Then she, Lupin and Moody left out the door. A moment later there were three separate cracks as they Disapparated away.

"You're never going in that, are you?" Ron's mother snapped. "Get yourself upstairs this instant and put on something respectable!"

She was looking expectantly at Ron but he couldn't see what she was yelling about. He wore jeans and a collared t-shirt, none of which had holes or stains. But rather than argue, he went back up and changed into a buttoned shirt and a pair of slacks meant to have been worn at Hogwarts the year before, and as a result were a little on the short side.

"And comb your hair!" she called up the stairs. "Why he has to be told is beyond me. He wasn't raised in a zoo..." Her grumbles trailed off as she moved about the downstairs, working off some of her fright for Hermione. Ron liked that his family was so attached to her; that his parents considered her one of their own, even when they didn't know how very close to the truth that was.

He turned and was about to leave when his eye caught sight of something that wasn't supposed to be there. His wand lay on his pillow.

They arrived at the Ministry of Magic ten minutes before the start of the hearing. It was held in judge's chambers on the sixth level down, which turned out to be a fairly large oval room ringed with tiered benches. A tall table and heavy wood chair were raised on one wall, and in the center of the room was a dais, presumably where Hermione would sit. The room made Ron a little nervous. The walls were a bright yellow color, probably meant to be cheery, but managed to be a little more manic than was comfortable. Harry was there when Ron and his parents arrived, and Ron made a bee-line for his friend.

"How was she?" Harry asked before he even sat down. "She didn't look at all good last night."

Ron shrugged. "A little green. I think she's scared."

"Understandable."

There were a number of people in the room. Ron recognized Rita Skeeter from the Daily Prophet, and she gave Harry a wink and a finger flutter. He just looked away. Several people near her were whispering and pointing at Harry, but Ron didn't think he even noticed that anymore. Hagrid sat at the far end, and he waved energetically when Ron caught his eye. Professor McGonagall sat beside him, prime and stoic. It was good to see them both again. Ron waved back. The aisles filled quickly, so there was no way to get over to them before the hearing.

Narcissa Malfoy was there, decked out in her darkest and finest. Draco was, of course, absent. Ron wondered if she was hiding him to keep him from answering charges. A hand touched his shoulder, and Ron turned to find Tonks had taken a seat beside him. She was wearing all black, and her hair was the softest pale blue and wavy - much like Hermione's but without the fluff.

She smiled sadly at him. "How are you doing?"

"Me?" It seemed an odd thing to ask. "I'm fine," he lied. He was anxious and nervous and angry and frustrated, and terrified and a little bit puckish, if truth be known. But his anxiety couldn't be anything compared to Hermione's. She must be beside herself. She'd spent the better part of the last week pushing him away; bottling up. Which made sense now, he realized. Whenever Hermione was under an unusual amount of stress she tended to push her friends away and close herself off from everyone. Now he wished he hadn't let her.

The judge came in, a Lord Phillea Rosmarus, III. He looked no more than forty to Ron, even in his black robes and grey powdered wig. He wore a bushy mustache, and tiny, green spectacles. An older model Amplifitizmo lowered to less than a meter above his head, as he spoke in a clear Welsh accent his voice boomed through the space.

"Let it be known on this day we are Hearing the case of Hermione Granger v. The Ministry of Magic, Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Chancellor Xavier Bombridge for the Prosecution. The

Defendant has answered the charges and has appeared willingly in this chamber."

There was a tremendous puff of orange smoke and Hermione appeared on the central raised platform, directly under a white spotlight. She seemed surprised at how many people were in the room to witness, though with the light on her that way Ron wasn't sure that she could make out anything more than figures in the dark.

"Miss Hermione Jane Granger, you are hereby charged with the following crimes: use of an Unforgivable Curse, intention to inflict bodily harm with an Unforgivable Curse, and failure to report the use of an Unforgivable Curse by another. Do you wish to enter a plea at this time?"

"No."

A few surprised gasps from the crowd made her look up and out. A chair materialized behind her in a puff of acrid smoke, and she was ordered to sit. She did.

"Chancellor Bombridge for the Prosecution," said a new voice, and Ron saw the same tall, odd-looking man who had visited when they were still in hospital. "Miss Granger," he began in a pompous, elitist tone, "do you recall where you were in the early morning hours of 21 September of last month?"

"I do," she said. "I was being held captive in the Cave of Regret."

"Oh, I see. You were being held captive."

"Yes. I was. Very much so."

"Then why is it, at precisely 3:17 that morning our Unforgivable Curse Enforcer alerted us to an infraction, and spit your name out?"

She shrugged. To her the answer seemed obvious. "Probably because I cast an Unforgivable."

Bombridge seemed taken aback. "You admit your guilt?"

"I do not," she said quite firmly, and Ron felt a swell of pride in his chest. There was his girl.

"But...but you just said that you cast an Unforgivable. These good people all heard you, Miss Granger. Do you now wish to take it back?"

"I do not. I cast an Unforgivable. Just as an Unforgivable was repeatedly cast at me. I'm sure your Curse Enforcer spit out another name endlessly that night and all throughout the previous day, and that previous night as well—"

"We are not here to discuss other people, or other cases!" Bombridge objected.

"Order!" Judge Rosmarus called. "Miss Granger. You will answer questions put to you. Period. We are not here to audience theatrics."

"Yes, your lordship," she said.

Placated, the judge turned back to Bombridge. "You may continue, Chancellor."

"Thank you, your lordship." Bombridge raised his fleshy chin in triumph and turned to the crowd. "Now, Miss Granger, please tell the Court what happened on the evening of 19 September, last."

"Er..." she hesitated.

"Speak up, Miss Granger."

"That was my birthday," she said. "Two days before. It's not relevant."

"Relevance is not for you to decide. Surely your council has explained that you would have to answer a wide variety of questions, not the least of which would determine both your state of mind and fragile emotional state on the morning in question."

"But—"

"Miss Granger, answer the question. What happened on 19 September that had you so very upset, so upset in fact that two nights later you'd mercilessly attack someone with The Cruciatus Curse." The audience gasped, and Ron watched as Narcissus Malfoy narrowed her pale eyes as Hermione.

Hermione's brows rose. "Nothing that happened on my birthday had anything to do with that—"

"As I said," yelled Bombridge, "that is not for you to decide!"

Hermione clamped her mouth shut, and for a moment she stewed in her frustration.

Where was her advocate? Why wasn't he speaking up? Ron searched the room, but Lupin hadn't returned. Ron's dad sat sitting two rows up, leaning forward with a drawn, serious look on his usually jovial face.

"The night of my birthday...nothing special happened." The moment she finished the sentence the chair she sat in began to glow faintly red, gave a little squeal, and then there, in front of everyone, the chair shocked the bloody hell out of her. She jumped and screamed a now all-too-familiar scream, and Ron's heart jumped with her. The jolt only lasted a second or two, but it was enough to put real fear in her eyes. From where he was sitting, Ron could see her hands shake. She pressed them against her knees.

"Need I remind you, Miss Granger," Bombridge said in a mildly bored tone, "that you are under oath? The chair knows when you know you're lying."

Her eyes watered, and she stared at the floor past her feet. Somebody had to help her. Ron turned to Harry, who looked as angry as Ron felt. "We have to do something."

"Who's her advocate? Do we know?"

Ron turned to Tonks on his other side. "Her advocate," he said. "Where is he? Why isn't he helping?"

Tonks shook her head. "Hasn't arrived yet," she told him quietly. "Remus has gone looking for him, but we're worried..."

"Worried?" Now Ron was worried, too.

"The Malfoy family is very powerful, as you can appreciate, and they claim they can't find their son. They think Hermione killed him."

"But she didn't."

Tonks looked at him. "We just found out about all this this morning when her advocate didn't arrive. The judge refused to postpone the hearing."

Ron glared at the judge. Was he a Malfoy lacky?

Bombridge cleared his throat, signaling to the room that he was prepared to continue with his examination. "Now, shall we try this again, Miss Granger? Kindly tell us what happened the evening of 19 September, last."

She clasped her hands together and pressed them into her lap. She cleared her throat. "There was a surprise party waiting for me when I got home. I was...surprised, I guess. I'd thought everyone forgot. I mean, a lot had happened recently so it would've been understandable. But they didn't."

"Were you happy, then, that your friends remembered your birthday? Your 18th, wasn't it?"

She closed her eyes. "I cried."

"Tears of joy, perhaps?"

"No."

"So, you were upset that your friends threw you a birthday party?"

"Yes...no...I don't know. No," she finally decided. "I was feeling so much at that point that it's difficult to know exactly."

"A mass of emotion, a tangle, if you will," Bombridge supplied for her.

"Yes," she agreed.

"Ah, to be a teenager again," mused Bombridge, and he smiled knowingly at the spectators. "So, your friends threw you a surprised birthday party and you, a twisted mass of teenage emotional angst, burst into tears. Then what?"

"I...er...then what, what?"

"Then what happened," Bombridge said with an edge to his voice. "Don't play coy, Miss Granger."

She looked back down at her hands. "I went into the kitchen, and when I came out Ron and Harry were fighting."

"Fighting?" he feigned surprise. "Whatever for?"

She raised her shoulders to her ears. "I don't remember them saying."

"Uh, huh," said Bombridge skeptically. "And then?"

"And then I went upstairs." The chair turned red and shocked her again. Ron nearly leapt out of his skin; Harry's hand on his arm was the only thing that kept him in his seat. The jolt left her panting with pain.

"Once again," Bombridge said, monotone.

Her voice hitched a little, and Ron shook his head. This was wrong. He'd never been to a hearing before, but he was certain this wasn't how they were supposed to go.

Hermione took a minute or two to collect herself. Then she raised her head and said in a firm voice, "After the boys argued, Harry's ex-girlfriend came in."

"Harry's ex-girlfriend? You mean to say Harry Potter had a girlfriend? Name, please."

"None of your business. She has nothing to do with any of this, and I will not betray her identity to—"

"Ginevra Weasley," Bombridge announced. "Daughter of Mr. Arthur and Molly Weasley of Ottery St Catchpole, Devon."

In the darkness above Hermione a huge three dimensional image of Ginny posing for her Hogwarts fifth year class picture appeared. Her bright, sweet face looked out at the audience, smiled, and then took on a serious pose before a flash, and then the image looped, and she looked out over the audience again. There was an intrigued murmur from the on-lookers, and the Chancellor turned back to Hermione with a satisfied smirk.

"Did you really think I'd come unprepared?"

Hermione winced and shook her head. "If you know the answer, then why ask?"

"Is it really necessary to remind you once again, Miss Granger, that you are here to give testimony? Do your surroundings not serve as enough reminder?"

"None of this has anything to do with why I'm here. You're grandstanding."

"And you're not giving us the whole truth. What happened when young Miss Ginny Weasley arrived? And I'll remind you again, Miss Granger, of the chair on which you sit."

Her face went stony blank, and she slumped against the straight wooden back. Her eyes turned haunted as she began to recount those few crucial moments in their lives when everything changed.

"Ginny came in. It was good to see her. We'd become closer...Ginny and I. Good friends. And then she went to Harry. He and Ron had just been fighting and, well, Harry got the worst of it, I'm afraid, and so Ginny went to him straight away. She kissed him."

"And?" Bombridge prompted.

"I thought I was going to die."

Bombridge turned to the audience. "We're back to the teenage tangle, aren't we?" A general titter floated through the room. "So, Harry Potter kissed his girlfriend, and you had thoughts of mortality. Care to tell us why, Miss Granger?"

"Ex-girlfriend."

Bombridge cleared his throat. "Tell us why, Miss Granger," he said sternly.

"Because we were cursed. Fated together. Because I Loved him, and she kissed him, and I knew it was wrong. Because she loved him, too. And I think...I think he loves her." The murmur that grew through the crowd bloomed in to shock and outrage.

Bombridge put a long, slender finger against his long, fleshy nose. "Uh-huh. You were Fated. To Harry Potter. The Harry Potter. You. A Muggle born."

Hermione hung her head, shook it. "The chair believes me. I don't care if you do."

Ron looked at the people watching, they whispered and shook their heads, many of them in shock, and he knew what was running through their heads: the Harry Potter, and Love Fated as well. Rita Skeeter's Quick-Quotes quill was scribbling like mad.

"And yet, he has a girlfriend? You must've been livid to see him kiss someone else!"

"Ex-girlfriend. Honestly, what does this have to do with anything? Your lordship," she addressed Judge Rosmarus, who was looking at her with a mix of strained shock and contempt. "If I enter a statement of guilt now, can we just skip to the sentencing phase of the hearing?"

"What's she doing?" Harry asked under his breath. "Is she insane?"

"She's trying to protect us," Ron whispered back. "We can't let her do it. She doesn't deserve to go to Azkaban."

The judge leaned forward over his table and glared down at her. "You were given that particular opportunity. You chose to decline. This hearing will play out. Now, answer the Chancellor's question."

Her brows furrowed. "Um...what was the question?"

Bombridge threw his hands up in exaggerated frustration and looked out over the people. "Replay!" he commanded, and a whirring sound filled the space, immediately followed by Bombridge's amplified voice.

"So, Harry Potter kissed his girlfriend, and you had thoughts of mortality. Care to tell us why, Miss Granger?"

"Ex-girlfriend.."

The sound of Bombridge clearing his throat. "Tell us why, Miss Granger."

"Because we were cursed. Fated together. Because I Loved him, and she kissed him, and I knew it was wrong."

"You knew it was wrong," Bombridge now said, slowly and deliberately. "That's a very interesting admission. You knew it was wrong."

"Uh..." Hermione seemed at a loss. "I don't see a question in your statement."

"My question, Miss Granger, is this: you saw Harry and his girlfriend kiss, and you 'knew it was wrong.' To what, precisely, are you referring? The two of them?" He watched her face, the guilt and anxiety playing out in her expressive eyes. "No. They were right, weren't they? Even though he was your Love. Even though you Loved him. You 'knew it was wrong.' What had you done, Miss Granger, that was so wrong? Because you Loved him, and were so very close to her... We're you Lovers?"

Hermione's face crumbled, and he knew that he had her. "Lovers? Bejezzuz! You and Ginny Weasley?"

The uproar in the room was topped by Hermione's own shriek. "Are you mad? It was Harry, not Ginny! Harry and I, you stupid, stupid man!"

The fury in her eyes left Bombridge self-satisfied. "So you and Harry Potter are Lovers. Teenage Lovers," he drawled out. "How...quaint."

"Quaint," grumbled Harry under his breath.

Ron shifted, uneasy in his chair.

"There was nothing quaint about it," Hermione snapped. "Ginny is someone we both care about."

"And you betrayed her."

"We did."

"And so, that night, on your birthday, when you saw her kissing your Lover, you..." He lifted his wand hand as if dueling. "A little Crucio?"

Hermione looked at him blankly. "Do you even know why we're here? I didn't cast The Cruciatus Curse on my birthday, and I certainly didn't use it on Ginny Weasley."

"But you wanted to!" he said, pointing a finger at her. "You wanted to!"

"I want to use it right now, as well," she bit out, and Bombridge gave her a slow, contented grin.

He raised a hand at the smiling Ginny image, and it blinked off. Then he turned to the on-lookers. "Now, Miss Granger, please tell the Court what happened once you witnessed Miss Ginevra Weasley kissing her boyfriend and your Lover, Mr. Harry Potter."

"Ron told us that we – that is, Harry and I – were cursed by a Fatum Spell by Draco Malfoy."

"Mr. Weasley told you this? You didn't know?"

"Um...no."

"You had no idea you had been cursed."

"Well, no, but—"

"Interesting. So, it's on Mr. Weasley's authority that you claim Draco Malfoy cursed you, and not, say, Mr. Weasley, himself?"

"Why would he do that?"

"Or, perhaps, a more likely candidate, Mr. Harry Potter?"

"Harry? You're insane."

"Am I? It seems to me to be every young man's teen sexual fantasy, two lovely women at once—"

"Not at once! Ginny was his ex-girlfriend, and anyway, she was at school, and when she came in, and everything was explained—"

"Oh, I see. He had to let her go. Turned her down, as they say."

"Something like that."

"Something? Please speak up, Miss Granger. We want his lordship to hear your testimony very clearly. You said, 'Something like that.' What was it exactly like?"

She pursed her lips and gave a huff of resigned frustration. "Ginny left. And then he...let me go..."

"I'm sorry, I didn't quite get that. He let you go, you say?"

"He told me to get out," she said quietly. "He told me to leave."

"Get out? But you're his True Love. Fated, according to Mr. Weasley. Why ever would Mr. Potter throw you out like a sack of rubbish?" It was clear he knew the answer. He leaned his elbows back against the rail separating the raised platform from the rest of the room and brought his fingertips together in front of himself.

Tears filled her eyes as she realized what she was about to say, was compelled to say. Ron watched in agony as she looked up to the ceiling to prevent even a drop from landing on her flush cheeks. Her brows rose, and Ron could still make out the pink scar that crossed the left one. "He saw us. I...kissed...Ron."

"Ronald Weasley."

"Yes."

"The same Mr. Weasley who told you that Draco Malfoy cursed you."

"Yes."

"You kissed him."

"Yes."

"Even though you're Fated to the Harry Potter."

"Yes."

"Is this yet another instance where you knew it was wrong, but you did it anyway?"

A tear escaped. "Yes."

"Tell us, Miss Granger, are you and Ronald Weasley lovers, too?"

The room seemed to hold its breath in unison.

"No," she said.

"Is it a lovers' triangle, perhaps," Bombridge pressed on.

"I said no," she snapped.

"Perhaps you're Fated to both boys! Did Mr. Weasley tell you that?"

"No."

"Was this an accident?"

"No – what?"

"Did you trip, or bump into his lips or something?" The room burst into laughter.

"No."

"Then why, Miss Granger, did you willfully and purposely do something you knew to be wrong?"

"I don't know." The chair jolted her again, and the people watching – including Ron – all jumped with her.

"Try again!" commanded Bombridge.

"Because," she gasped out.

"Not good enough!"

"Because even without the Fates I love him!" she yelled and leapt up from the chair, and in that instant she disappeared into a plume of orange smoke. The lights in the room shot up, as did the angry cries of the audience.

"Order!" yelled the judge. "Order!"

"What happened?" Harry demanded. "Where did she go?"

"Back to the holding cell," Ron told him. Harry had an odd look on his face, and he didn't meet Ron's eyes. "She got up from the chair. It's a failsafe. She's here for an Unforgivable, after all. She must be dangerous." When next she sat in the chair, she would undoubtedly be in chains.

"I will have order!" Judge Rosmarus yelled. The room quieted a little. "I've enough to think about for now. This hearing will continue tomorrow, 9am. He stood and left the chamber.

Slowly, amid the din of excited talk, the room began to empty. Two men in Press robes ran over and flashed Ron's picture before he had a chance to stop them, and then they scurried away.

"They'll never make her stay here over night? Will they?" Ron asked, the reality of what was happening finally sinking in.

"Until the hearing is over," Tonks said. "She'll be needing some things. I'll talk to your mum about it." She got up and went over to the door where Ron's parents waited.

"We have to do something," Ron said again, to no one in particular. The panic inside him was bubbling just below the surface.

"We need Dumbledore," Harry said, pulling his shoulder. "We need the Order."

End of chapter 8

Chapter 9 – To Do Something

By the time Ron and Harry had apparated back to number 12 Grimmauld Place word had gotten out about how the hearing had been run, and the basement kitchen was brimming with Order members in varying states of outrage. Lupin and Shacklebolt were conspicuously missing as they were usually the two to lead the Order meetings now that Dumbledore was gone. It was Moody who finally quieted the room with a slam of his artificial metal leg on the stone floor, and asked for any new information gathered on the Malfoy family. Hestia Jones, a small woman with shiny black hair, and Elphias Doge wearing a tweed robe, had been assigned to tail the Malfoy family ever since Hermione first went missing weeks before, and then continued when Draco couldn't be found to answer charges. They both stood now and addressed the room.

"Well, we been dividin' the work between us, we 'ave, and 'aven't much luck to speak of," said Hestia, her round cheeks flushed bright pink as usual. She seemed younger than her probable fifty years – Ron thought due to her dark hair and round face.

Elphias spoke up. "Right she is. The family hasn't so much as gone to a pub since all of this has happened. Haven't seen a hair of young Draco, either, curse him. His mother seems genuinely distraught at his absence. The family has a lawyer on retainer, a Mr. Berry Stir, Jr. He's visited the Malfoy family manse several times in the past few weeks and now lately it's been nearly every day. We've been looking into him, as well, but it's been hard to find any information on him at all. He's had some work with the Ministry, but his files there are sealed. Not at all uncommon, and yet..."

"He's a Death Eater," Hestia whispered excitedly.

"Unconfirmed," Elphias corrected. "But it is looking that way."

"Which only makes sense," said Moody. He straightened his prosthetic nose, and then wiped it with the back of his hand. His magical eye sized up the two speakers. "Have you seen or heard anything to make you think they might've had something to do with

Hermione's advocate's absence? The timing seems too perfect for it to be coincidental. I don't like it."

There was a general murmur of agreement in the room.

It was just then that Lupin came in. He looked pale and pasty, and Ron recognized the symptoms right away. Undoubtedly there would be a full moon tonight, and Lupin would be out of commission for the next couple of days. Talk about bad timing.

"There's no sign of him anywhere," Lupin said, breathless. I managed to track down where he lives, and talked with his landlady - a Muggle, so I had to play that one just right - but she said she hadn't seen him in several days. His office is closed with no sign explaining." He lowered himself on to one of the wood chairs, and pulled a handkerchief from his pocket to dab at his brow. "I've just been to see Mr. and Mrs. Granger, who by the way, now have absolutely no trust in me or the magical community any longer, it seems. But they're also at a loss. They tried several times to contact Mr. McTurvish, with no success."

"And McTurvish is?" asked Doge.

"Hermione's hired retainer," responded Lupin, testily. "James McTurvish. I was told he specializes in cases involving Muggle-borns."

"What do we know about McTurvish?" asked Moody. "I want a full background check on this man." His eye scanned then room before he grumbled, "I'll do it myself."

"Good man," said Lupin. "You do that. You know, we really should do something about not letting Muggles into the Ministry ipso facto. The Grangers should have a right to see their daughter tried, regardless of their non-magical status."

Just then Tonks hurried in, her clothes still black and her hair still blue, but now more upset than Ron had ever seen her. She knocked over a chair on her rush to get to Lupin's side. "Remus," she said breathlessly, as if she had run all the way. "Remus, they won't let us

in to see her! They've got her locked up and we can't get in! I'm an Auror and they won't let me through! How can I not have clearance? An AUROR!"

"All right, now." Lupin pulled her down into the chair next to his. "Tonks," he said slowly. "Start from the beginning."

"They won't let us in!" exclaimed Ron's mum from the doorway, having just caught up. "Those bureaucratic imbeciles say little Hermione Granger is a danger to society, and they have her locked up in maximum security down on level 9! LEVEL 9, Arthur! That wonderful child is being held in level 9! You've got to do something!"

Ron's father looked stunned.

"We brought her some clothes and books and things," Tonks continued, on the verge of hysteria, "But they wouldn't even deliver them to her. They said I posed a probable security risk - ME! I'm a security risk!"

This time Lupin put a hand to her belly, and her gaze rose to meet his. They had a moment of stillness between them where they seemed to lose track of everyone else in the room. Ron felt awkward, like he was intruding on a private exchange, and he tried to shrink back against the stone wall. But then, Tonks gave Lupin a small smile of understanding and the moment ended. Taking a deep breath, Lupin looked to Moody.

"There's nothing we can do about the security. They have the legal right," Moody told them. "She did cast an Unforgivable. The law now classifies her as a danger to society, both magical and Muggle."

"Preposterous!" cried Mrs. Weasley.

Tonks shook her head. "You know Hermione, Alastor. Without her wand she can't open a can of soup! She doesn't pose a danger to anyone. They're doing this for some other reason. To make an example, or- "

"It's disgusting!" Ron's mum insisted. "Those people are making this into some huge sensational piece of propaganda! Just look what's already in the Daily Prophet! And the hearing didn't even adjourn an hour ago!" Ron's mum dropped the latest copy of the Prophet on the table, and Ron saw very clearly an upset and silently shouting Hermione leap from the witness chair and disappear into a puff of black and white smoke. The headline blinked, "TEEN LOVERS COMMIT UNFORGIVABLE!" with a subtitle of "HARRY POTTER'S LOVER GOES MAD!"

Tonks shook her head, calmer now, yes, but still angry. "Who's calling the shots in the hearing?" she asked. "Who's behind this Bombridge fellow. Surely there's someone controlling him, or influencing his line of questions. I mean, why else ask a teenager about her sex life?" Ron looked at his shoes to keep himself from looking at Harry at the mention of Hermione having a sex life.

Tonks accepted Lupins handkerchief and blew her nose. "Are the Malfoys behind this? It must be the Malfoys. Some sort of smear campaign."

"If the Malfoys are behind this," Mrs. Weasley said, "we'd best figure out why, and quickly."

"Revenge!" insisted Hestia.

"Do they need a reason?" asked Doge. "Isn't this just the sort of thing they DO?"

Ron felt a little queasy and turned away from the newspaper and then rest of them. None of them seemed to remember that he and Harry were even in the room; and with their candid talk, even in the cool, dark kitchen Ron found himself sweating. No one was doing anything, they were just sitting around talking as if trying to decide the best course to win a quidditch match. If ever Hermione need him it was now, but Ron was at a complete loss as to what to do. Why hadn't he stopped her from casting that bloody spell? She'd been right there, pressed up against him, he easily could have done something, anything...snatched the wand away from her sooner. Killed Draco himself.

He thought his head might explode.

"She shouldn't have to go through this," Ron said to himself, under his breath. "None of this is her fault."

Harry was beside him, and still facing the rest of the room. He put a hand on Ron's shoulder. "We'll figure it out," he assured. "We always do."

How? Ron couldn't see his way through the fog of injustice. "I just hate seeing her cry."

"I know. Me, too." There was a pause, a moment of exhale, and then Harry slowly asked: "Do you remember the last time she cried? Before all of this, I mean. The last time you saw her really cry?"

Ron thought back, but every image that flooded his brain was Hermione reading, or Hermione looking irritated at him, or Hermione rolling her eyes. "No. Not really." She wasn't that type of girl, thank Merlin's beard! Hermione was as level-headed and practical as they came, if prone to outbursts of righteousness and bossiness.

"I do," Harry said quietly. "First year. Remember? She was upset and hiding in the girl's loo, and then the troll-"

"Right," said Ron. He couldn't help but smile a little. They'd been so young then, and Hermione so very annoying. If he's known then even half of what he knew now... "Now I remember. Oh, and there was the Yule Ball in 4th year. She was a little off her game then."

"We've been through a lot," Harry continued. "The three of us. And I remember a lot of crying on my part, but not her. She's not normally the weepy type." He turned and looked at Ron with sad eyes. "You were there, outside the kitchen with me. You heard everything I heard."

"What?" Ron asked, lost.

Harry nodded back to Tonks, who sat in the chair with a new bout of tears tracking down her cheeks and a protective hand over her stomach. It was no longer flat, but the small bulge was so slight that if one didn't know what to look for it would go completely unnoticed. Lupin was still talking, discussing options and strategy with Moody and several of the Order, but he sat very close to Tonks, his arm around her shoulders, and every so often he cast a concerned glance at her. He didn't like that she was so upset, not that Ron blamed him, but then his eyes lowered to her belly and ... Ron knew what to look for. Ron remembered what they'd heard in the hall.

"Do you think?" Harry asked. "Is it possible? That Hermione...?"

Ron's flushed face went ice cold, and the edges of his vision dimmed. For a moment he thought he might topple over, or that his head might actually explode, but then at the last second he lurched to his right and vomited all over the slate floor. His knees buckled and had Harry's reflexes not been what they were Ron would've landed in the mess he just created. Ron's dad bounded to him and they managed to get him seated.

"Head between then knees," Ron's mum ordered. "I'll put on some tea." She flicked her wand and a mop and bucket bounded in from the broom closet at the other end of the room.

Ron barely registered any of this. His mind was lost in a mantra of: "...she's not, she's not, she's not..." Hadn't she said she wasn't? Ron couldn't remember the exact words. All he could recall from that moment was a gut-ripping hatred and the feel of Harry's thin neck between his hands. He looked up at Tonk's stomach - he couldn't help himself - and then had to close his eyes again. A moan escaped his throat. Women in that condition cried all the time, didn't they? Where was she now, at that very moment? Was she afraid? Did she think he'd abandoned her? Or that he would if he knew? He had to go to her. He had to see her for himself, to reassure her. To reassure himself.

His father stopped him before he was even out of the chair. "Easy, now, son. Just sit still for a minute."

"Dad," he croaked out. "You have to get me in to see her!"

"You know I can't," his father said. "And this isn't going to help her. We need to think logically, we need to figure out what's-"

"She's all alone!" Ron insisted. "On level 9. And what if she's...she's..." He lifted his eyes to meet Harry's

"She's not," Harry said quickly. "She said so, remember? She's not."

"Then why the bloody hell did you bring it up!" Ron's voice went shrill and cracked.

"I don't know!" They were talking over each other, and tension was flying. "I was just thinking how emotional she's been-"

"She's been cursed, pulled apart, thrown to the curb, kidnapped, beaten, tortured, and you wonder why she's been a little weepy lately!" Ron shook his head. "This is about her, Harry, not you! And just so you know: it wouldn't matter to me if she was, either! She's still Hermione! And it's about her, not you!" His gaze shot back to Tonks, the shock on her face and the protective hand over her middle. His insides went wonky again. He needed some air. "Let me go," he said as he yanked his arm from his father's grasp.

He headed out into the cool night with the intent of walking off the craziness buzzing through him, the steady beat of his mantra powering each step. He didn't even notice when it began to drizzle.

He ended up, hours later, exhausted, and outside the visitor's entrance to the Ministry of Magic. He crammed himself into the Muggle telephone booth at the corner the way his father had done him the few time Ron had accompanied him to work.

"Wretched people," he grumbled under his breath. "Can't make a booth big enough for a man. Stupid Muggles." He picked up the receiver, dialed MAGIC, and yelled his name at it. There was a voice, but it was so small and far away that he couldn't make out what it said. He yelled, "Ronald Weasley! Here to see Hermione Granger!" After a moment a small badge plopped out of the coin return and Ron

glanced at it before he angrily clipped it to his shirt. "RONALD WEASLEY, Lost Cause," it read. A grinding noise shook the booth and it began its descent into the ground. By the time he arrived in the Ministry's lobby he'd had enough time to think about what he was doing here, and what he was going to say. Not that either would win him a prize for brilliance.

"State your name and business," said an older black witch, with bright white hair and teeth. "And slowly, mind you. I have to write it down." She held the quill out, ready to scribble down whatever he said.

"Ronald Weasley," he said as slowly as he would without feeling ridiculous. "And I'm here to see Miss Hermione Granger."

The woman looked up at him. "Oh. Her. You can't see her, you know. She's on level 9."

"I know that. But I need to see her anyway." The woman stared blankly at him over half-moon spectacles. "I need you to make an exception," he said. In his head it had sounded a lot more plausible than it did when it left his mouth.

The guard's eyes narrowed, and her thickly painted lips pursed. "It's for your own safety, you know. She's committed an Unforgivable. That witch is unstable."

"I'll take my chances," he said.

The guard cocked her head to one side, and Ron was certain she'd seen his like before. "You know I'm just a guard here. I can't make that decision for you. Though, if I could, I wouldn't."

"OK," Ron said, revamping his plan. "Then I need to see someone who can make that decision. I've come to see Miss Granger, and I'm not leaving until I have, see?"

"You really think the Minister of Magic has time to talk to the likes of you? He's a busy wizard, and not in the habit of admitting wizards in the middle of the night without an appointment just so they can see their criminal girlfriends! Now, Mr. Weasley, you have exactly ten

seconds to turn around and march yourself back into the telephone box before I call security and have you thrown out!"

"She's not a criminal," Ron objected. "She's a girl, and she's scared. She's all alone here on level 9, and I want to see her! Now!"

The guard didn't bother to count. She pointed her finger at the large red knob on the wall beside her and the alarm sounded. Three more guards in peacock blue robes appeared out of no where and had Ron surrounded, with wands drawn, before Ron could even blink.

They threw him out like a rubbish bin, and he landed hard on the rough sidewalk. It was a seedy neighborhood in the Muggle world, and the street was narrow - made even more so because of the broken down and abandoned cars, bags of rubbish, and dim lighting. Worn out and defeated, Ron picked himself up and dusted himself off. The right knee of his jeans was ripped open. It only stung a little.

What was he going to do to help her? What could he do? She needed a new lawyer, right? An advocate who would object to how she was being treated, and who would steer the case back in her favor. So, he reasoned, he'd get her one. He had some money saved. But how did one go about finding a lawyer? Fred and George would know, he figured. With as much liability as they carried?

Yeah, they probably had two.

Ron pounded on the door without success, and then went to shooting flares from his wand on to the windows above the store. Eventually Fred made it to the window. "What's your problem?" he demanded through a yawn. "It's the middle of the night!"

"That's what I told him!" the sign said.

"Open up!" Ron shouted. "I need your help!"

"You're off your nut! It's bleeding one in the morning!"

"Fred! Hermione needs me, and I need your help! I don't know what to do and they've got her locked away and..." He was grasping, he

knew, but what other choice was there? He couldn't think straight. "Help!"

For a second his brother hesitated, and Ron could see the battle playing out in his head.

"Freddy?" It was a girl's sleepy voice. "What'cha doin'?"

"Nothin'," he said over his shoulder. Then to Ron: "OK. But just because I like Hermione. Don't make a habit of this." Then he came down and let Ron in.

It took no time at all to retell the story to his brothers. George, a little less receptive than his twin, sucked down two cups of coffee before he said, "Another advocate won't do her a lick of good. The Malfoy's will just get to him, too. You need a better plan, mate."

"Assuming it was the Malfoy's," Fred added unhelpfully.

Ron wasn't ready to abandon the only plan he'd been able to come up with so easily. "What if the new advocate was someone they couldn't get to? Like someone with the Order?"

Fred shrugged. "Are there any barristers in the Order?"

Ron thought for a moment and then sighed. "Don't think so. But she can't be left alone up there in the chair without council, without someone to object to the way she's being treated. It's like watching a lamb being slaughtered."

"Hardly that," quipped George. "More like a badger, I'd say."

"She's defenseless up there, and the whole time she's trying to protect me and Harry and Ginny..." Ron got lost for a moment in the image of Hermione taking one of the shocks from the chair, and then wild, terrified look her eyes held afterwards. "Do you have any polyjuice potion already made up? Maybe if I look like one of her guards I can get inside to talk to her."

"Talk to her?" George said, as if he'd just tasted something bitter. "She doesn't need a chat, man, she needs action! You've got to find that Draco kid. Get him to admit to torturing her. Maybe if they understand how bad she had it, they'll let her off easy, and stick it to that little wart instead."

"I don't really see what that would do," Fred said, sipping his own coffee, black with seven sugars. "She cast an Unforgivable, not an Unforgivable-Unless-You've-Been-Tortured. Why are they having a trial, anyway? There's not a question of whether she did it, is there? Not that I want Hermione to go to wizard's prison or anything."

"It's a hearing," Ron said, "and it's to determine sentencing." He shook his head. They couldn't send her to Azkaban, they just couldn't. It would break her. If this is what she was like after just two days with Draco, then what would she be like after a month or two in prison? "Do they even send teenagers to Azkaban? Cripes! I've got to do something."

George sighed. "You know we'd help if we could."

"Just be careful," Fred warned. "Don't do anything that might make things worse for her."

Ron glared at his brother. "What kind of a cad do you think I am? Make things worse for her!" Indeed!

"The kind who leaps before he looks," George agreed with his twin. "You've got to admit you're not exactly thinking clearly these days. I mean, case and point, you came to me and Fred for help."

Ron looked from one twin to the other. Damn.

"Go home," George said. "Get some sleep. And stay out of trouble. And don't wake us up in the middle of the effing night anymore!"

"I wish Dumbledore was still alive," Ron said quietly. Everything would be different. Ron thought that they'd probably all be back at Hogwarts, if Dumbledore was there to protect them. But even if not, he certainly would've been able to intervene and help Hermione out

of this nightmare. Dumbledore was always a wizard that created fear and awe in Ron, but he always felt safer knowing he was nearby and in control.

The twins nodded in solemn agreement.

Ron didn't go home. Moments later he apparated outside and across the street from number 12 Grimmauld Place. The protective spells and guards on the manse prevented anyone from apparating directly inside, and belatedly Ron realized he no longer had a key to the front door.

It hardly mattered because a moment later Harry skulked out in a dark coat with the collar turned up. It was a chilly night with a stiff breeze that rake dead leaves from the trees, and Ron wished he had his own coat as he followed his friend down the street and around the corner. Harry did a lot of walking in the shadows, though it was difficult to know whether he was deliberately trying not to be seen. After all, there was a bright moon out now that cut a path between the clouds and Ron had no problem following him, which meant others wouldn't either.

They walked along a couple of minor roads, down an alley, and out across a public lawn. Ron stepped over the KEEP OFF THE GRASS sign, giving it only the briefest of thoughts. Muggles were concerned with the strangest things.

Harry stopped at a smoke shop, and looked around before heading inside. With his hand on the door he spotted Ron, and for a moment they both just stood there looking at each other. Then Harry let the shop door close, and then went over to meet his friend.

"Fancy meeting you here," he quipped. "Following me?"

Ron shrugged, looked out into the dark, damp. "You looked like you were up to something, and you didn't bother to let me in on it."

Harry's brows rose at the accusation. "You ran off, last I knew. Where did you go, anyway?"

"No where," Ron mumbled. "So, what are we doing here?"

Harry seemed pleased that Ron was ready to join him, and threw a glance back at the dark store. There were lights on, and a figure moving inside, but for the most part the place looked gloomy, especially on this glum night. "I thought of a way to get in to see her," he said quietly. There was no need to ask who he was talking about. "Moody knows a guy who has a brother who works for Madame Stoley," he indicated the figure walking behind the cloudy windows. "She once ran the securities department for the Ministry building. She knows the ins and outs of the whole complex, where the anti-magic spells are, and how to get by them."

Ron blinked at him. "Harry. You're never going to break into the Ministry, are you?"

"Not exactly. But if I can navigate around some of the-"

"Harry! Think, mate! What if we get caught?"

Harry's eyes narrowed. "Then I'll go alone," he said flatly.

"I didn't mean that. What if we get caught and they associate Hermione with us? Or what if we get caught and arrested, and then Hermione needs us even more? Or what if we get caught and it's decided that the Ministry isn't a safe enough place to keep her and they move her to Azkaban until the hearing plays out?"

Harry went a little green. "Uh...I hadn't thought about that."

Ron rolled his eyes. He felt very like Hermione at the moment, and he didn't like it one bit. "Don't make me be the sensible one, Harry. I'm no good at it."

"But how can we do nothing? Lupin said to let the Order handle it, but from what I can tell, they're not doing anything."

They were both men of action, Ron decided. Doers, not talkers. They needed motion to feel useful. Hermione wasn't like them. She was

always in her head, always thinking and planning. She would talk an opponent to death faster than either of them could lift a wand. So, what would she do, when there was nothing to do?

The answer dawned. "I think I have an idea," Ron said, feeling a smile cross his lips.

"You think?" Harry asked, doubtful.

"Where's the Daily Prophet building?" Ron asked.

Harry shrugged. "Diagon Alley, I suppose."

"Great. The last one there has to spill his guts." Then Ron disappeared with a CRACK.

The building was squat, leaned to one side, and had the Daily Prophet logo animated across the second story windows, and like a ticker tape, the day's headlines ran in a constant flood of sensational story-telling below. HARRY POTTER'S CRAZY KIND OF LOVE...TWO GIRLS AND NOT EVEN TWENTY...RAIN TOMORROW...FIRST DAY OF HEARING ENDS IN SMOKE...

Harry grimaced at the words. "Whatever you're thinking, Ron, I'm sure I don't want to do it."

"They're waging a war against Hermione in that courtroom. We need to wage one for her out here. And you, as it happens," Ron said happily, "have an in. Not only are you friends with Rita Skeeter-

"I wouldn't call us friends," Harry grumbled.

"You also happen to be The Harry Potter. You'll give them an exclusive."

"Again?"

Ron could see his friend remembering a few years back when Rita Skeeter had painted him a pathetic boy craving attention and love, and mildly insane, and then a second time when Hermione arranged

an interview with Rita for the Quibbler telling the truth about You-Know-Who's return. "It worked the last time, didn't it? Hermione's ideas always work. Must be odd to be her."

"I'm not sure she can help it," Harry said, glaring at the building.

"Tell them about Draco, and what Draco did. Tell them about Hermione's advocate and his mysterious disappearance, and about the Malfoy family's connection with the Death Eaters. Lucius is still in Azkaban, after all."

"And us? Do I tell them about her and me? About you and her?"

"If you tell them, then she won't have to feel like she has to protect us."

"And Ginny?" Harry asked. "Do I drag her into this, too? I won't do it."

"She's in it, Harry."

Harry shook his head, hating all the choices before him. Ron could feel the tension in him, the battle of what to do or not do. "If I could just get in and talk to her-"

"What?" Ron demanded. "What would you say to her?"

"I'd tell her that she's not alone," he said lamely. Ron understood. It wasn't about what he'd say, it was about what he wouldn't have to.

Ron pointed to the Prophet's front door. "Tell her in there," Ron said.

Unconvinced and dragging his feet, Harry went inside.

The second day of the hearing had the judge's chamber was packed so tight people were practically sitting on top of each other. Not an inch of standing room was left, and the doors wouldn't shut for all the bodies. The room was overly hot, and before things got started, Tonks excused herself, saying she needed some air. "I'll be back at Headquarters," she told them. "Let me know what's happened the instant this is over."

Ron was beyond nervous. His legs bobbed in an anxious rhythm as he pretended to ignore the whispered and pointing fingers around him. The Daily Prophet had gone to print shortly after Harry got his story out, and the cover page held Ron's Hogwarts picture along with the older picture of Harry and Hermione caught embracing at the Triwizard Tournament a couple of years back. The headline read: DROP OUTS IN LOVERS TRIANGLE, HARRY POTTER SCORNED. Once people got past all the crazy Fated stuff, the article talked in depth about Draco Malfoy and his association with the Death Eaters, as well as the tattoo he wore and the reason he needed the Cup and what he did to Hermione in his attempt to get it.

Of course, that was assuming that people got past the Fated part. Ron was nervous about how his mother would react to the article. He'd crashed at Harry's after they finished at the Prophet, and so he managed to put off that particular moment of awkwardness a little longer. Would she be happy that he and Hermione were Fated once again? Would she scold him for going public with such a private story? Would she understand the necessity?

Judge Rosmarus came into the room, not at all surprised or concerned with the number of people in his chamber. He sat comfortably in his overly large judge's chair, waved at the Amplifitizmo which descended as he announced in a somewhat bored voice: "Let it be known on this day We are continuing to Hear the case of Hermione Granger v. The Ministry of Magic, Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Chancellor Xavier Bombridge for the Prosecution. Chancellor Bombridge is in attendance, as is the Defendant."

The room grew silent in anticipation, and in the next moment there as a huge plume of orange smoke and Hermione appeared on the small dais. She looked awful. Her hair was limp and unkempt, her robes wrinkled as if she'd slept in them - only Ron doubted she had slept; the bags under her eyes were so very dark and pronounced. She didn't startle this time, but quickly took the offered seat, sinking down into it in a very uncharacteristic slouch. Immediately chains snaked up from under the seat and bound her wrists to the arms of the chair. She stared down at the chains, not in surprise, but more

contemplative; as if she couldn't figure out how she came to find herself in this situation.

"Miss Granger. How lovely to see you." It was Bombridge's pompous clip that curled through the quiet. "I trust today you will keep your composure and give us only the truth. I'd hate to have a repeat of yesterday."

She didn't say anything, didn't look at him. Ron wondered if she had been drugged.

"Let us begin again," said Bombridge. "Please do tell the court about the night of September 19th."

Ron watched her swallow, and then the tip of her tongue flicked out to lick her lips. She closed her eyes. "That's was birthday," she said. Her throat sounded crackly, dry. "You know all about that now."

"Oh, not quite all, Miss Granger. Kindly tell us: What is the Order of the Phoenix?"

End of chapter 9

Chapter 10 – Fool's Errand

"They're late," Harry whispered. "The hearing should've started ten minutes ago. You reckon she's sick?"

"Dad's here." Ron pointed out his father in the advocate's chair. With a fresh haircut and the new robes he looked calm, and more regal than Ron had ever seen him. "He'd know if it was something to do with Hermione. He's already seen her this morning."

"Well, Bombridge is here," Harry said with a scowl at the barrister. "It must be the judge. I don't like it. Something's happened."

"Malfoy's not here, either." Narcissa Malfoy was suspiciously absent. Ron scanned the room three times to be sure, but she was definitely missing.

Harry popped his head up to study the gathered people. "It can't be a coincidence, can it?"

Normally this would be something Lupin would be quick to respond to. "Where are Tonks and Lupin?" Ron asked. One would think they'd want to be there on Ron's dad's first day as a living target.

"Tonks was sick this morning, and Lupin said he was going to stay with her until she felt better. He came by for coffee."

"Sick? Are you kidding me? She's Tonks! How sick does she have to be to have Lupin coddle her? I tell you, Harry, he's lost his mind to that witch."

Harry gave him a look and then made a point of patting his belly. "She's sick," he said again. "He wants to be with her."

Ron frowned. "What do you mean?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Never mind."

The room quieted, and Ron strained to see over the heads of the people in front of him as the judge took his seat. He pointed at the

Amplifitizmo, and it lowered into place. "Let the record show," the judge announced in a bored tone, "that the accused has acquired new council: a Mr. Arthur Weasley of the Ministry of Magic's Detection and Confiscation of Counterfeit Defensive Spells and Protective Objects." There was a general murmur through the crowd. Bombridge looked displeased.

There was a cloud of orange smoke and Hermione was suddenly there in the chair, but she didn't look like herself. Ron's blood ran cold. Her eyes were dull and unfocused, and her hair was dark, flat, and stringy against her head. Her skin was the color of chalk, except for the raging acne that now bloomed across her chin, nose and forehead; and the cut across her left eyebrow had turned into a scar that seemed unnaturally pink. She wore black and white striped prisoner robes that were big enough for three of her. The Ministry of Magic's emblem was emblazoned across the front.

"Oh, Hermione," Harry whispered with all of the emotions Ron was struck with.

"Miss Hermione Jane Granger, the accused, present," the judge said. "Chancellor Bombridge, you may continue your examination."

"Thank you, your lordship." Bombridge approached Hermione, but Ron noticed he didn't look her directly in the eye. Perhaps she unsettled him as well. Was it possible the wizard had a conscience?

"Miss Granger. You've had some time to reconsider. Are you now prepared to tell us about the Order of the Phoenix?"

"I object!" Ron's dad said, jumping to his feet. "This hearing is not about Orders or Miss Granger's romantic life, or inconsequential happenings days before the act in question. This girl has obviously been subjected to unnecessary questioning and un-wizardly treatment at the whim of our Chancellor Bombridge. I petition this court to dispense with frivolity and get right to the heart of the matter."

The judge raised one of his thick brows and looked at Bombridge.

Bombridge cleared his throat. "Your lordship, everything we have discussed has relevance to the state of this witch's mind, and her willing ability to commit an Unforgivable. She is a menace to the wizarding world—"

"Your lordship!" Arthur shouted again, but the judge waved him down.

"And," continued Bombridge, "I intend to prove that she is not alone in her perversity. We are not safe if Unforgivables are practiced within rebel organizations once more!"

The room erupted in shock and fear.

The judge gave Hermione an appraising look. She hadn't really moved since she arrived. With a cough and a clearing of his throat, the judge quieted the room and announced, "Miss Granger, answer the chancellor's question."

She swallowed, licked her lips. Her eyes searched and then found Bombridge. "Would you...repeat the question?" Her voice sounded reedy, thin, barely there at all.

"Miss Granger, what is the Order of the Phoenix?"

She took a breath, and Ron waited for his father to jump up and stop her, but he didn't. Ron closed his eyes, not wanting to see Hermione willingly shock herself into unconsciousness again.

"The Order of the Phoenix," she said quietly, "is a game that I invented."

No shock came, and Ron looked up, stunned. Had his father arranged to have the chair's charm blocked?

Bombridge looked scandalized. He hesitated. "Excuse me? Please repeat that a bit louder."

Again, Hermione took a breath. "I said that the Order of the Phoenix is a game I invented."

"A game?" Bombridge repeated.

"Yes." And still no shock came.

"I shall humor you," he said with anger just below a very thin line of civility. "Then tell us, Miss Granger, how does one play the game?"

"I assign values to things."

"For instance," Bombridge prompted.

"For instance...when Harry tells me I'm pretty because he wants to kiss me, that's a compliment of the first order. But when he mentions to someone else how pretty I am, when he says it without expecting anything from me, that's a compliment of the second order."

"Nonsense," Bombridge barked out. "Tell the judge about the Order of the Phoenix!"

Hermione turned, focused on the judge and absently scratched at the side of her neck. "When Ron kissed me outside the store in Hogsmeade - that was a kiss of the second order, because it was spontaneous, but came out of frustration and not tenderness. When he kissed me at Harry's it was a kiss of the third order because when we kissed there was real...passion, I think one would call it."

"Your lordship!" Ron's dad stood, his face as red as ever. Ron knew his own face must look similar. "Teenage games are simply not relevant! Please redirect the chancellor!"

"Your lordship," Bombridge snapped before the judge could get a word in, "this girl is lying!"

"The chair disagrees!" Arthur insisted.

"Enough!" yelled the judge. "This is not a Muggle parliament, gentlemen. You will conduct yourselves as is befitting this court!" He twisted his mustache a little and then, when there were no further objections, he turned and looked at Hermione.

"So, this game," the judge asked, "what does it have to do with a phoenix?"

"It's possible, at least with Ron and Harry, for them to do something so completely wonderful that ranks an order of seven, which is the highest order, and then in the next moment say something so completely hurtful – like I have to stay with him because I've no other choices rather than he'd like me to stay, or he'd rather I not go...it amounts to the same thing, I reckon – which puts him down to a zero order. And then he will give me a bauble, a locket, say, because he doesn't know the proper words for the moment, or maybe he just doesn't want to use them, and in that moment he manages to rise again to a third order. So, like a phoenix he flies, and then dies, and then is reborn."

The judge considered her and then Bombridge before he turned back to Hermione and asked, "So, this order game is how you rate your boyfriends?"

"Among other things, yes."

"What sort of other things?"

She shrugged. "Books, chips, professors at school."

"And the assigning of order levels is completely arbitrary?"

"Not completely," she said. "It's based on how I feel at the moment. He's not ranking very high," she said off-handedly, and tossed a thumb toward Bombridge. There was a nervous twitter that rustled through the crowd.

"You kissed her in Hogsmeade?" Harry accused under his breath. "While we were still Fated?"

"What do you want from me?" Ron asked. "It only ranked a second order!" Ron wondered which order she would assign to that first kiss Harry had laid on her in the parlor. Higher than the kiss Hermione gave a three?

"How many other times did you kiss her? What else did the two of you do behind my back?" Harry demanded.

"Oh, shove off," Ron whispered back. "You said you were over her."

Harry continued to glare. Ron turned back to what Hermione was saying.

"...after all, it was a very confusing time. I'd all these new and old feelings that were in direct conflict with each other, and I'd no idea why. I thought for a while I was losing my mind..." She was now talking and staring out into nothing, her head cocked to one side as if lost in the memory and no longer aware that she was sitting before a judge and twelve score on-lookers. Ron wondered again if they'd put a potion in her food to muddle her brain a little.

Ron's father looked worried. "Your Lordship," he said, standing. "Once again, this game has nothing to do with why we're here, and the chancellor, while I'm sure he doesn't mean to, is wasting our time and further exhausting the accused."

"I agree," Rosmarus said with a flick of his hand. "Chancellor, continue with the next line of questioning, if you will."

"But, your lordship!"

"I'm bored with teen love affairs. Do not test my indulgence any farther," the judge commanded.

Bombridge grabbed the fleshy end of his nose and grumbled, "Very well, your lordship." His eyes narrowed on Hermione, but again she didn't seem to care. "Miss Granger. Tell us about the Cave of Regret."

For the next hour Hermione spouted off everything she'd ever read about the cave, including its geographical coordinates, its general geological make-up, and several of the more lively legends associated with it. Ron quickly lost interest, as did Harry, who continued to throw surly glances in his direction from time to time. Ron's dad let Hermione talk as much as she wanted, and every time

Bombridge attempted to steer her back to how she felt while in the cave, she simply started quoting facts again. She was getting good at dodging his questions without the chair objecting. Ron started to wonder if his father had had the charm dismantled after all.

"Miss Granger, enough," Bombridge finally snapped after a list of all the different fish that could be caught in the waters around the island the cave was on. "You say that you were taken to the cave under duress."

"My wand hand was broken, as was my wand, and I was physically picked up against my will and kidnapped. Yes."

"And all this happened while you were staying at the Weasleys' house in Ottery St. Catchpole, Devon?"

"Yes."

"The same Weasley who is now representing you?"

Hermione's eyes didn't waver from Bombridge. "Yes."

"And who else was in the house at the time?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. And Ron, upstairs in his room."

"And all of these people were there while you were being abducted against your will? While your hand was being broken? And not a single one heard any of this? Is that so?"

She thought for a moment, and while her face didn't change, her voice became even more distant. "That is so."

"Hmm. Why is that, do you suppose?"

"I'm sure I don't know."

Draco had put a Muffle Spell on the room, Ron wanted to scream out. It wasn't a difficult spell to accomplish. Hadn't they learned it in fifth year?

"And so you were whisked away to the Cave of Regret? Just like that?"

"After breaking my hand and my wand, and kicking me in the head and stomach, and after a lengthy struggle, yes, I suppose Draco Malfoy did manage to whisk me away just like that." Her sarcasm sounded like music to Ron's ears. It was the first time all day that Hermione had shown a little of her old self.

"On his broom?" Bombridge asked. "I'm assuming if he stole you against your will that you didn't Apparate."

"He had a Portkey."

"Really? That's quite advanced magic, you know. I doubt there's a person in this room who could do it. Certainly none who could do it legally. Are you suggesting that Mr. Malfoy made it himself?"

"I'm suggesting that there was a Portkey."

"What did it look like?"

She frowned at this point, the first change in expression Ron had witnessed all day. "It was Ron's old prefect badge."

This surprised Bombridge. "Ronald Weasley? It was his prefect badge? Not the Malfoy boy's? I'm given to understand he was prefect at Hogwarts at the same time you and Mr. Weasley were."

"It was Ron's," Hermione confirmed.

"And you didn't find that curious in the least?"

"At the time I was in a tremendous amount of pain," Hermione said. "Curiosity was beyond me."

"And still you noticed the badge, and recognized it to be Ronald Weasley's."

"As I've said three times now, yes."

"Your lordship," Ron's dad said as he rose once more. "Can we move this along? This line of questioning has become repetitive, and once again has nothing whatsoever to do with why we are here."

"Yes, all right," said the judge. "Chancellor, please move forward with your questions."

Bombridge shot Arthur an angry glare, and then turned to Hermione. He walked toward her and spread his hands on the rail that separated them. She just looked at him, unimpressed with his temper.

"What happened when you got to the Cave of Regret? A place, I'd like to add, you've already explained as being out-of-bounds to the wizarding world."

"I'm sure you mean to ask what happened once my abductor, Draco Malfoy, deposited me on the cave floor. I didn't just arrive. I was dropped there. On my hand, I might add. The broken one."

"Don't argue semantics, Miss Granger."

"Then don't make it sound as if I strolled into a restricted cave."

"Your lordship, the accused is becoming argumentative."

The judge flicked his hand again. "Move it along, Chancellor."

For the first time Bombridge's eyes narrow on the judge, and Ron found himself wondering just what their connection might be. Certainly they both worked for the Ministry, but was there something more?

"You do realize that it's just your word that we have that you were abducted at all, Miss Granger. No one has seen nor heard from young Mr. Malfoy since you last attacked him."

"How lucky for him, then, that he's managed to escape the Ministry's reach and hasn't been forced to answer the many, many charges for

casting Unforgivables I'm sure will await him when he decides to surface."

"Hmph," said Bombridge. "You say that you were attacked."

"Repeatedly. For days. With the CruciatusCurse. Yes."

"And then you were rescued?"

"Yes."

Bombridge turned and face the room. He had a smug look on his face. His eyes met Ron's, and a chill went up his spine. "Tell us, Miss Granger. Who was it who came to your rescue?"

"Ron and Harry," she said simply.

"The same Ronald Weasley who told you that Draco cursed you? The same Ronald Weasley who kissed you even when he knew you were intimate with his supposed best friend Harry Potter? Is it possible that it's the same Ronald Weasley whose prefect badge was used as a Portkey to abduct you from his parents' house? The same Ronald Weasley whose father is now acting in your defense?"

"Uh..." Hermione's eyes shot to Ron's father, and for the first time that day she looked startled. "Yes."

"We've been told you're a clever girl, Miss Granger. Can you honestly tell us that you never once questioned Ronald Weasley's role in all of this?"

"Yes," she said, and when the chair didn't shock her several witches in the front row clucked their tongues at her in shame.

"But you're wondering now, aren't you? You're wondering if it isn't possible that Ronald Weasley set up this entire charade."

"Nonsense," she said. "Why would he do that? He's my best friend. He cares for me."

"Ah. But as you so eloquently explained earlier, it was Harry Potter who was your Lover, not Mr. Weasley. It must be hard to live in that kind of shadow for...how many years was it? To see one's best mate with fame and fortune, and the girl that he loved. Harry Potter's good at everything, or so the papers have reported. Good marks, a natural on a broom – he was Quidditch House captain and champion. I'm certain you were not the first young witch to have her head turned by him. On the other hand, poor, ginger Ronald Weasley – it must be hard for him to live up to that. What could he possibly have to offer?"

"Plenty!" Hermione snapped.

"Objection!" Ron's father called out.

Bombridge ignored them both and continued. "Perhaps he wanted more than mere friendship, Miss Granger, and he needed a way to act the hero to you. Perhaps he knew of your involvement with Harry Potter and needed an excuse to explain it away. Certainly you wouldn't continue your affair with Mr. Potter if you knew it was nothing more than a curse, would you? Knowing you, Miss Granger, I rather think not."

Her eyes left Bombridge, and for the first time in almost two weeks, she met Ron's gaze. His heart skipped a beat. She could see him. She'd known where he was all along. He leaned forward, as if drawn to her. Her face dropped ever so slightly, and he knew she was considering what Bombridge had just said.

"No," he said, and then he shouted. "No! Hermione, you know it's not true! Don't listen to him!"

Harry grabbed Ron's arm and forced him back in his seat, but it was too late. Guards in maroon robes were already closing in on him, and the press snapped pictures as fast as their flashes would allow. The whole room seemed to be talking and moving at once. Ron was escorted from the chamber, past all the giggling people, past a dark face he recognized as the Portuguese wizard, and next to him another dark figure: Viktor Krum. Ron gaped at him until he was tossed into the hall.

Ron arrived at the manse in a fit of panic. He hadn't expected Tonks and Lupin to be there, nor his mother, Fred and George, nor Moody, but they were all gathered around the massive old mahogany table drinking tea and eating tea sandwiches. When Ron saw them it was like he hit a brick wall. He needed to be alone, to think, to find a way to save Hermione.

"Over already?" Lupin said, frowning at his pocket watch. "How did it go?"

"How was your father?" Ron's mum asked, fretting. "He was quite anxious this morning. Tonks, you should've seen him, all aflutter with excitement and nerves. Out of his depth he kept saying, but I assured him he was doing the right thing—"

"She thinks it was me!" Ron blurted out. He couldn't help himself. The image of Hermione's anguished eyes had him shaking where he stood. His mind spun, his body hummed. Was this a heart attack? He couldn't catch his breath.

"You stupid bugger!" Suddenly Harry was behind him, and when Ron whirled around Harry shoved him back against a painting on the wall. The black birds in the painting startled and flew off over the jagged burnt umber hill. "She lost it with you howling like that! How could you do that to her? What were you thinking?"

Lupin jumped up to intervene, but Moody was already across the room. "Easy, now," he said in his gruff bass voice. Harry didn't let up, though. He kept his arm across Ron's shoulders and throat, fury in his eyes.

"Harry," Ron said, almost pleading, "she thinks it was me! She thinks I did all that stuff! Didn't you see her? The look she gave me? Bombridge's got to her, they've brainwashed her—"

"She wasn't questioning you! She was scared for you, you bloody berk! She finally understood that Bombridge plans to pin all this on you!" Disgusted, Harry gave him one last shove.

"Ronald, where's your father?" his mum asked a little stiffly, eyes wide, now truly worried.

"He's seeing to Hermione," Harry cut in with a deadly glare to Ron. "He may be a while."

"What in the bloody hell happened in that chamber today?" Moody demanded.

"The chancellor," Harry began, "he's controlling the truth, twisting it to make Ron look like the mastermind behind all of this, and he's making Hermione out as delusional and dangerous. He's trying to lock her up for good."

"How badly did I mess things up for her today?" Ron quietly asked.

Harry was still fuming, but his temper seemed to mellow some as he considered his response. "You're out of the hearing. Sorry to tell you, mate, but you've been banned."

Ron closed his eyes. "The chair...it didn't hurt her again, did it?"

Harry shook his head. "No, she was yelling for you when she jumped out of the chair, and that ended the session. She was just upset, I reckon. Your dad will calm her down." He said this with such confidence that Ron couldn't help but stare. Harry was self-assured; he was strong and smart. Today he'd been in control of himself, when Ron went mental.

"You're sure she didn't think—"

"Don't be a divvy. Of course I'm sure. You should be, as well. She's Hermione, after all. She's cleverer than the both of us combined."

"You should've kept her," Ron found himself saying. "She'd be better off with you."

Harry swallowed and looked down at Ron's knees. "She wasn't."

"I never should've kissed her. I'm sorry I did that to her. To you."

"Don't do this," said Harry, with weariness in his voice. Then, in the next moment he was doubled over, grunting in pain, a hand firmly clasped to his forehead.

Ron had seen this enough times to know what it meant. He grabbed Harry's arm and helped him to a chair.

"Are you all right, dear?" asked Ron's mum. Various other queries were made to Harry from around the table, as well.

But when he recovered enough it was Ron he looked at. "He's happy," Harry said. "Delirious."

The next morning Ron's face was all over the Daily Prophet. He didn't bother with the articles. The headline "EVIL MASTERMIND?" followed by photographs of him falling off his broom during an assortment of Quidditch games told enough of the story for Ron to roll his eyes and toss the paper away. He dressed and decided to open up the shop. He felt guilty about going to Hogsmeade when Hermione was still fighting for her future, but if he sat around the Burrow all day he was likely to lose it.

The sign greeted him with a sarcastic, "Hullo, and fancy meeting you here." Ron noticed it had changed its hours to "OPEN – your guess is as good as mine, CLOSED – right now, so shove off."

When he closed up early, the sign just sighed.

Ron went to Headquarters to wait for word of the hearing. Tonks and his mum were already there, as was Shacklebolt. When Harry finally turned up, he looked dazed and pale. Ron's mum immediately went for him.

"You all right, dear?" she asked in that tone that said she knew he wasn't. But Harry nodded and dropped down at the table. She placed a cup of tea in front of him.

"How did it go?" Ron asked, worried that he was seeing the result on Harry's face.

For a long moment Harry gazed, sightless, down at his tea. "Your dad started his case today," he said at last. "He showed the healers' records. Hermione's St. Mungo's hospital records."

"And?" said Ron impatiently.

Harry just shook his head.

Tonks reached across the table and touched his hand. "You knew it was bad, Harry—"

"No. I didn't know it was that bad. I'd no idea. I mean, I saw her and everything, but I didn't know. I wish I didn't know now." Harry closed his eyes. "What Draco did to her, it's the same thing that Bellatrix Lastrange did to Neville's parents. She was tortured, Ron. Tortured."

"I know that—"

"No!" Harry insisted. "You don't. You've no idea. They showed us — your father showed us! Every inch of her was battered or bruised or broken or twisted. It was the most horrible thing I've ever seen. Neville's parents went mad with the Cruciatus, yes, but Draco kicked her and bit her and hit her with rocks as well. He tied her up and then hung her upside down for hours with her nose broken and her eyes swollen shut...and all that blood running into her head..." Tears fell down his cheeks, but he didn't seem to notice.

Ron was too stunned to be uncomfortable for him, but he did feel a little quiver deep within his energy well. Was that Harry?

"He dislocated her shoulder, and then fixed it, and dislocated it again. There were burns on her legs. He conjured spiders to bite her there. He told her she was a Mudblood, and not worthy of food or drink while he sat inches from her and ate and drank until he was stuffed, and then threw the rest on the ground just beyond her reach and kicked dust over it. He told her you were dead, Ron. And when she cried, he Cru—"

Shacklebolt jumped up. "Enough!" He grabbed Harry by both shoulders from the other side of the table and pulled Harry's face very near his own. "Get a grip, Potter!" Harry seemed to suddenly come back to himself, and he pulled away to collapse back in the chair.

Ron felt a huge release within him, as if a tension rope had just been snapped, and he lost his balance and fell to the floor.

"Ronnie?" Ron's mum called to him, but to his relief she didn't get up to help him. "You all right? That boy hasn't fallen out of a chair in years. Used to all the time as a tot, of course. Had all the balance and grace of a lead balloon, that one."

Ron ignored her. Harry had tapped into his well, now he was certain, even without Ron having let him in. He placed a protective hand over his chest, as if flesh and bone could keep Harry out. Ron looked up to see his friend now wiping his eyes, unaware, it seemed, of what he's just done. Or, what he was about to do, Ron thought darkly. Kingsley had stopped Harry. Did Harry really have the power to commit an Unforgivable without a wand? Ron swallowed around the lump in his throat. With Ron's well, perhaps Harry did.

It was a week later before Ron was able to catch up with Lupin. Early in the morning, a few hours before the hearing was set to begin, Ron found him and Bill just in from all night duty. They exchanged the usual hullo. Bill made excuses to leave almost immediately, most of which revolved around Fleur.

Once they were alone, and the coffee was put on to percolate, Ron sat down next to Lupin.

"Something's happened," Ron told him. "I think it might be important."

"Hermione?" Lupin asked quietly. "Tonks said there was some concern..." He touched his belly, and Ron rolled his eyes.

"She wasn't supposed to tell anyone!"

Lupin nodded sympathetically. "When she hadn't heard anything, she began to panic a little. She's prone to that these days, I'm afraid."

"It's not about that." Ron hadn't heard anything, either, and had unconsciously assumed that no news meant no news. Surely his father would've told him something if there were something to tell. Wouldn't he?

"All right, then. What's happened?"

It took a moment for Ron to switch gears and go from Hermione preppers to the possibility of Harry accidentally casting an Unforgivable without so much as a wand.

"What?" Lupin said, once Ron explained. "Why didn't you tell me sooner? Or Moody? Or...anybody?"

"Uh..."

"And you're sure you didn't intentionally give him your magic?"

"I'm sure. We were just sitting there."

"And you didn't actually feel him? You weren't sure he was there?"

"It was a queer sort of swishing feeling, but..."

"Before when you and he connected, in the lessons—"

"It was different," Ron assured him. "This was almost...sneaky?" That wasn't the right word. "Snake-like." And then he realized what he said. For a moment Lupin gave him a hard look. "His scar has been hurting again," Ron said quickly. "You don't think that You-Know-Who is controlling him, do you?"

Lupin dismissed that thought. "Harry's strained just now, so his defenses are weaker. I'm not surprised that the link through his scar is more active, but I seriously doubt it goes any farther than that. By now he knows what to look for. I'm sure..." But there was doubt in his voice.

"He hasn't been acting erratically, has he?" Lupin asked.

"No. Just that night when he got back from the hearing."

"And he was upset. Blimey, I was upset. Those images..." Lupin shook his head. "I hate that she's going to end up in Azkaban after everything she's been through. It's—"

"Dad'll get her released," Ron said, and hopped up to get the coffee and two mugs. His response was almost knee-jerk by now. He'd said the same words to himself so many times over the past week.

"Ron. Come sit down." It was the way that he said it, serious and morose, that made Ron nervous. So, he took his time coming to the table, fussed over cream and sugar, and asked if Lupin wanted honey.

"Ron," Lupin repeated. Ron obeyed. "Now, Ron, tell me you understand what Hermione has done."

"Don't be daft—" Ron began, but Lupin wouldn't let him dodge the question.

"She cast an Unforgivable, Ron."

"I know that! I watched her do it!"

"There is only one consequence for an Unforgivable."

"But—"

"That's why it's called Unforgivable."

Ron shook his head. "No! Why are we all going through this if it's hopeless? Why are we putting her through this?" There had to be hope that his Dad would figure something out. Hermione couldn't be sent away; it would kill her. He thought it very likely it would kill him as well.

Ron jumped up, anxious and twitchy, and ignored Lupin's pleas to sit and calm down. He had played calm, he had been sitting for weeks,

and now Lupin was telling him that it didn't make a lick of difference. "I'm getting her out of there."

"Ron—"

Ron wasn't about to listen anymore. He turned on his heel and made for the door, only to bump into a yawning Harry on his way in.

"Coffee?" Harry asked, and inhaled deeply. Ron didn't bother to stop. He was out the door, down the steps, and heading across the street to the alley so he could Apparate away when Harry caught up to him.

"Wait!" Harry yelled. Ron didn't. He didn't want to give Harry or anyone else the opportunity to talk him out of what needed to be done. "Ron!" Of course, when Harry grabbed his arm and swung him around, Ron did slow up a bit.

"Life in Azkaban. That's all she has to look forward to. This hearing, my father parading around like he's a barrister, it's all a farce! They're going to send her to Azkaban, Harry, forever!" The words brought tears to his eyes, but Ron wasn't about to let them fall; he was too angry at the world, and at the moment the world included Harry. "I'm not going to let that happen."

"What are you going to do?" Harry was slightly out of breath, and his hair was more unruly than usual in the frosty morning breeze.

Did Harry want to help or stop him? It didn't really matter. Ron couldn't allow either. "Don't worry your pretty little head over it. Just go back inside and do nothing with the rest of your precious Order."

Harry was taken aback. "Ron, she's my friend, too."

"She's my Love!"

Harry nodded. "And now I know what that means. Let me help you."

"You'll just get yourself into trouble."

"I don't care!" He meant it, Ron saw, and it reminded him of why he'd liked Harry in the first place. They were a team, the three of them. Or...they had been.

Ron sighed, glanced around the street to be sure they weren't being watched, and then turned back to Harry. "The thing is, Harry, we'll be fugitives, me and Hermione. Like Sirius was. You can't live like that and defeat You-Know...Voldemort," he corrected. "The Order needs you now. You're the reason they exist. Me? I'm dispensable."

"Not to me," Harry said. "You're my Smisurato."

Ron rolled his eyes. Things were getting far too sentimental for comfort. "You're still in your night clothes, you know."

Harry looked down at his slippered feet, robe, and pajama bottoms and gave Ron a crooked grin. "At least...at least let me help you plan—"

"Can't," Ron said simply. "You've got to stay out of it, mate."

"But...but that's not how we work."

He left Harry then, and didn't look back. He didn't want to admit to himself that he might not see his friend again.

It took three days of planning, gathering supplies, and making covert contacts before Ron was ready to jump into action. He'd purposely not gone back to the Burrow for fear he might implicate his parents by proximity. He worried that they could be the subject of attack once the Ministry announced Hermione was missing, but Ron had made as many allowances to his scheme as he could afford in an effort to protect them. He would have to trust that the Order would be there when he could not.

It was the end of the first week in November, cold and rainy, and in the very first hours of the morning no one stirred outside the visitor's entrance to the Ministry. He stowed his pack behind a rubbish bin half a block from the phone booth; not too close to cause suspicion and

yet close enough that he and Hermione could reach it quickly once they made their escape.

Heart hammering, Ron squeezed himself inside the phone booth, punched in the necessary numbers, and yelled his reason for being there. The nametag the booth spit out read "Ronald Weasley, Fool's Errand." Soon he was deposited into the vast underground lobby, just as he planned.

Only one guard in maroon robes was on duty. He was a large, tired-looking wizard with thick blond hair that seemed to start at his eyebrows and continue up and over his head.

"Name?" the guard said without looking up from his magazine. "And why the bloody hell are you bothering me at this time of night?"

"Ron Weasley, and as I said to the booth, my father's the advocate for the Muggle-born who cast the Unforgivable. He's sent me to pick up some parchments he forgot to bring home. I'll just pop up, get the satchel, and get back to bed. What d'ya say?"

"Yeah, yeah," the guard muttered. He turned a page. "Just leave your wand, and sign in."

The plan was working beautifully. Five minutes later Ron was in his dad's office. It was a cramped space with all the odd Muggle artifacts and rubbish he'd collected over the years, but Ron wasn't concerned with that just now. He dove into one of the many cabinets that lined the walls and searched quickly for the bright red canvas bag labeled ROYAL MAIL. He emptied the contents (a few old mailers and adverts that never arrived at their destination), threw the strap over his shoulder, and poked his head out the door. He didn't really expect to see anyone at that time of night, but he indulged in a deep, relieved breath when it turned up empty anyway.

Phase one, complete.

The stair at the far end of the hall was monitored. The same with the lifts. Without his wand, Ron was extremely limited in his magic, but luckily he'd planned for this as well. From out of his pocket he pulled

a Chocolate Frog. He ripped open the package he'd so carefully sealed the night before just in case he'd had to turn out his pockets. He bit the head off the frog. Buried down inside the body was the tiny yellow pin he'd secreted there. He pulled it out with his nails and was about to carefully place it between his teeth when a voice stopped him.

"Ron?"

He froze at the familiar voice. Tonks was the one thing he hadn't planned on.

"Ron? Is that you?"

Of course it was him. She was standing not four meters from away in a fairly well lit corridor. He squeezed his eyes shut in an attempt to think, but his mind only screamed that Tonks was about to ruin everything.

"What are you doing here?" she asked without an ounce of suspicion in her voice. She actually looked pleasantly surprised to find him prowling about at three in the morning. "I was just buttoning up a case we've been working on for ages. Finally nabbed the wizard who's been hunting down elderly Muggles and then hexing their houses for their family members to find. Terrible stuff. It's such a relief." She dropped a couple of the parchment rolls she was carrying. Ron picked them up for her.

"You know," she continued, giving him a smile of thanks, "you probably shouldn't be on this level. Care for a nip down in the Atrium? They've a cart with the best sausage hillmacks."

Never mind that the food cart had packed up hours ago, hillmacks were probably the most revolting thing his mum had ever put on his plate.

"Ron?" she asked, now sounding a bit concerned. "You good?"

He nodded.

She didn't seem to believe him. "Why don't I just deliver these," she indicated her parchments, "and we'll pop up to my office and...we can talk more freely." She gave a little look at the walls to tell Ron someone might be listening.

While she dropped off her reports, he slipped the yellow pin into his pocket hoping he wouldn't be discovered with it, as his carefully contrived and planned-out Chocolate Frog hiding place was now in pieces. He followed her, not knowing what else to do. His window of opportunity slipped a little further away with every step he took.

Tonks' new office was more spacious and less cluttered than his father's. She offered Ron a seat, pulled out her wand, and two cups full of tea appeared on her desk between them. She held up a hand to stop him when he went for his cup, made a jab with her wand, and a small yellow and orange sphere at the corner of her desk began to glow. A soft, melodic tune filled the room. Then she jabbed at it again, and the globe began to pulse.

"It's safe now," she said, and picked up her tea. "Moody made it for me. Blocks all kinds of magical listening devices – seeing eyes, crawlers – and will tell us if anyone approaches the door. Lovely little thing, isn't it?" She took a sip, set down her cup, and knocked over a stack of parchments in her NEEDS ATTENTION box.

"Leave it," she said with a wave of her hand. "Just tell me what's going on."

"Nothing," Ron said. He wished he'd thought to rehearse that response.

She eyed him for a moment, cocked her head, and then said, "You know, Harry's rubbish at lying. He stutters a little, and can't make eye contact. You just turn red. Is this Order business? And don't lie to me, Ron, I'm on your side."

He sat there for a moment considering his options, none of which he particularly liked. "Tonks," he said slowly, "they're going to send her to Azkaban. Life in Azkaban. She's eighteen."

Her blue brows lowered as what he said sunk in. Tonks frowned. "I knew this was rubbish," she said. She rubbed her hands over her face. She looked very tired all of a sudden, as if her body had just realized it was close to three in the morning. "Bloody, bloody hell. I wanted to tell you, Ron. I knew you'd go all barmy."

"I'm not!" he insisted defensively.

"Ron, I know it looks as if the Order isn't doing much—"

"You're not!"

"We, mate. We." She sat forward, crossed her arms, and rested them on the desk. "We've been taking turns – well, not me because..." She looked down at her middle. "But the rest – Kingsley, Remus, Moody, they're all taking Polyjuice to look like your dad so that they can take turns with your dad to defend Hermione."

Ron's brows rose. "Whatever for?"

"Ron, your dad's a great bloke; he's witty and clever, but he doesn't have Moody's experience with Defense Against the Dark Arts, or Kingsley's knowledge of the law, or Remus' ability to talk himself out of corners. Each of us has special skills, and we're all working very hard on Hermione's behalf. And when we're not in court, we're hunting – actively looking – for Draco. We reckon You-Know-Who's got him. And we reckon we might know where."

"But...but why didn't you tell us?" Ron asked darkly.

Tonks pursed her lips and gave Ron a hard look. "You've not been...reliable lately. Understandably," she added, but it didn't take the sting out of what she said.

"I'm completely reliable!"

"Oi, then! What was it was you thought you were going to do here tonight?"

"Nothing!"

"Lovely," she said dryly, and then opened one of the drawers in her desk. "Have you been keeping up with the Prophet this week?"

She dropped a stack of parchments in front of him. A half-page image of Hermione in her under-things glared up at him. In the picture she was still crying, still hurting after what Draco had done to her, and every bruise, cut, burn, break, and insult was clearly visible as someone off-camera prodded her to turn. Luckily the picture was resigned to black and white. The headline read TORTURE VICTIM COMMITS UNFORGIVABLE. FORGIVABLE?

"You think it's an accident that the judge released these pictures to the press? Once the Prophet printed them, they started painting her as a survivor and a strong young witch, not some batty slag. And just in case you were wondering, they haven't printed anything about your supposed mastermind plot to win Hermione's favor for days now."

She continued talking, but Ron lost the thread of what she was saying. He couldn't take his eyes from the picture. It was as Harry had described: horrible. And everyone had seen this. Hermione, in her knickers. Hurting. It was extremely private, and she'd been exposed to the world. He jumped up from the chair, startling Tonks into silence in the process.

"I can't stun you," he muttered, trying to reason things through until he realized he was staring at her expanding mid-section. "But I can't let you stop me, either. Hermione doesn't deserve Azkaban for what she did. You know it as well as I do. I'm taking her out of here tonight." His voice was calm, sure, the complete opposite of how he felt.

"Have you not been listening? We're fighting for her!"

"Lupin is right and I've been naive. There's only one sentence for casting an Unforgivable. The Order can't change that, and I can't let her live the rest of her life being tortured. I won't."

Tonks shook her head, took a deep breath, and picked up her wand. "Follow me, but don't open your yap. And if you do anything funny I'll

stun you into tomorrow, Weasley. Don't think I can't. Order or no, I'm still an Auror."

He followed. She was right when she said she was still an Auror. They were in the very heart of the Ministry, and if she was suspected of anything nefarious she would risk not just her job and her freedom, but she might also expose the Order as well. She had divided loyalties, whereas Ron, as of three days ago when he'd dreamt up this scheme, had only one. In a way, it was freeing, but part of Ron felt as if he was standing on the edge of a great chasm with nothing but his robes to break his fall.

Tonks led him down the corridor and through a series of rooms, as if to avoid the obviously well trafficked areas. Twice she pointed to a floor tile, was careful to avoid it, and watched as Ron did exactly the same. There were three flights of stairs that Ron had never known were there; all three were accessed with Tonks' wand. She opened a secret passage by pulling a tooth on a grinning gargoyle guarding a small room lit only by a suspended green orb. Inside was a room unlike any Ron had ever been in. There was no floor, at least that he could see (though he was certainly standing on something) and no walls, either.

There was one guard on duty, eating a cucumber and ramble jelly sandwich. He looked up when they entered. Then, he went back to eating and watching the dozens of crystal balls that hovered in a semi-circle around him. Each held a small, unmoving scene of different corridors and rooms within the Ministry.

With a gentle arm, Tonks led Ron over to one side and pulled him closer to the spheres. The images weren't still, as Ron had first thought. One, on the upper corner, was quite bright and a small figure moved repetitively within it. Pacing. Ron leaned in, savoring his first sight of Hermione in more than a week.

"She's not asleep," he said quietly.

"She rarely sleeps." Tonks watched with him, concerned.

"How much more of this can she take? And then Azkaban?"

"Ron, I don't think you've considered all that's at stake. Here, she's safe at least. No one can get to her."

"Not even me," Ron whispered under his breath.

"There are some of a certain family who might not want to wait for the final sentencing...or who might think it too lenient, whatever it is. Particularly if they had a family member directly involved with her crime." She said this quietly, pointedly. "Ron, as bad as things are for her right now, she's safe."

It was the one thing he'd not considered, and the enormity of that particular set of consequences left him speechless. For a brief moment the disorientation of standing on nothing, in nothing, left him wobbly enough to cause Tonks to grab his arm and shove her shoulder under it.

"Easy, tiger," she said, and led him in the opposite direction. It wasn't until they were through the door that Ron realized there was one. In the corridor she asked, "Better now?"

It was kind of her to suggest that it was the room and not the guilt and self-loathing that left Ron light headed.

"I can't get you in to see her. Wish I could, you know, but I can't."

Of course she couldn't. Now Ron understood that she should, as well.

She took him up to the lobby and helped him check out. Wand in hand, Tonks gave him a hug. She whispered, "Ronald, you brave, stupid little wizard, if you ever come here to do anything like you were thinking of doing again, I'll have you stunned, tied, and fried up for breakfast." She gave him a golden smile and then turned and headed back to her office.

Ron was starting to understand what Lupin saw in her.

It was a couple of days before Ron saw Harry again, and only then because Harry tracked him down at the store.

"So! That's how it is, is it?" Harry demanded as the tinkling music announcing his arrival died away. "A week I've been waiting! A week, you bloody berk, and not so much as an owl comes my way!"

Ron looked up from behind his register, baffled. "Eh?"

"The last I know my best mate is about to break my other best mate out of the Ministry, and a week goes by with no sign of any of it, or him, and every day I've been going to that hellish hearing, every blood day, and Hermione – do you even care about her anymore?"

"Hey now!"

Harry turned and punched at a box of Sour Stomachs. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Ron sighed. "Sorry," he muttered.

"Sorry?" Apparently Harry had expected something more. The smell from the broken box was quickly filling the room. Ron pulled a stink bag from behind the counter and put the Sour Stomachs in it, pulled the cord, and then tossed the whole thing into the masticating rubbish bin near the door. It burped happily.

"Look," Ron said, tired and defeated. "I tried. I went for her. I had it all planned out. I just couldn't do it. And I'm not even sure that's a bad thing anymore. I mean, I'm not you, Harry. Right? I'm not a hero. Sure, in a fight I can stand my ground, but I'd be no protection for her. I could get her out of there, but I'd be the one painting a target on her. I'm useless. Is that what you wanted to hear me say?"

Harry's face dropped. "I know what happened at the Ministry, if that's what you're going on about. Tonks and your dad sat me down and had a long, hard go at me to be sure all thoughts of rescue were driven from my head."

"If you know, then why did you come in here ranting like a Howler sent from my mum?"

"You've been avoiding me."

"Have not."

Harry glared at him again.

"All right," Ron admitted. "I've been avoiding everyone."

"Well, sure, you're going to avoid the other lot for a while. That just makes sense, right? But not me. And you're not useless. It's no wonder you couldn't do it all on your own, really. You're part of a team. That's how we work. Bloody prat."

"Yeah, well," Ron said. Harry gave him an encouraging grin and Ron returned it with a little nod.

That's when the door chime announced a customer, and Ginny walked in the store. She froze when she saw Harry, and her eyes went round. Harry had much the same response. After a few tense moments she simply turned and walked out again.

"Not that I even pretend to understand birds, but shouldn't you go after her?" Ron asked.

"What would I go and do something like that for?"

"Well, because you fancy her, maybe?"

"She's got a bloke."

Ron just shrugged.

"She wasn't with him, was she? Just now?" Harry asked. Ron shrugged again, but Harry seemed to feel this was enough participation to continue the conversation. "Maybe they broke up. Or maybe she's moved on to the next poor sap." This he said with an ugly edge to his voice. "She looked good, though. Don't you think? Pretty."

"I think she's my sister."

"Yeah. I should've known you say something like that."

"Something like what? She is my sister!"

"Care for a pint?" Harry asked miserably.

"A pint of what? Are you buying?"

"Does it matter?"

It didn't, much. Ron closed up, the sign huffed its disgust, and the two of them went back to the manse. Harry opened several bottles of wine he found in the larder. They got stinking drunk together for the first time that day, before the sun ever set.

End of chapter 10

Chapter 11 – No Words

Ron shifted to sit on his other hip, and tried to readjust his legs without waking them up completely. He'd been crouched inside the shrubbery for nearly seven hours – only halfway through his shift – and it was taking a toll on his long, lanky form. Men of his size weren't meant to prowl around in vegetation, or sit still for hours on end. His stomach rumbled unpleasantly, and he pressed a fist against it. Supper had come and gone hours ago. It would be morning before he saw anymore food.

When Lupin had first suggested an assignment for the Order, Ron had leapt at it. Whatever it was, he'd thought, it would be doing something, rather than just sitting around being useless. Apparently there's wasn't much difference in being useless or useful for the Order. He'd been watching the same house in Wiltshire on and off for a fortnight, for hours on end, and seen absolutely nothing. Ron had serious doubts that Draco was within a hundred kilometers from the place, let alone hiding inside it. Why anyone would go inside that ratty old heap of timber was beyond him.

The house itself was an old thatched cottage that had been haphazardly added-on to several times in the last couple of hundred years. The plaster and beam walls were in varying stages of decay, the north side more so, which was where Harry was currently sitting and being useful. They had the place surrounded - the two of them, as it were - though surrounding an empty, abandoned house seemed to Ron to be a tremendous waste of time. Somehow he thought that doing something would include actual doing.

For about the hundredth time that night Ron pulled his slicker tighter over his double layer of jumpers and glared up at the dark, miserable sky. December rain bit more than any other, and the breeze seemed to burrow like smidge worms into his very bones. He pulled his mitten-clad fingers up to his face and warmed his nose and lips with his own breath. He closed his eyes.

His mind drifted back to that September night when he sat on the floor, his legs entwined with Hermione's, when her warm and solid body had draped languidly against his own. She'd had a nightmare

that night, and hadn't yet learned to muffle her tears or turn him away. It had been particularly difficult to wake her, he remembered, and she'd struggled against him – that's how they'd ended up on the floor – but he recalled vividly when she finally came to herself how she wrapped her arms around him and squeezed him tight. It had taken a while for them to relax against each other, and when they did she drew lazy circles under his t-shirt, against his bare back. The thought of it now woke warm tendrils at the base of his belly. As they snaked lower he shivered. Just thinking about her these days was enough to drive Ron to distraction. He shifted again, pulled up on the legs of his jeans to make a little extra room in the crotch.

Out of the corner of his eye, a movement startled him. He held his breath and peered through the gloomy night, in an attempt to focus on just what he'd seen. It looked like a light, maybe, something running. Then he caught sight of it again, beside the old pile of rubble that was once a well. Shacklebolt's patronus was a silvery rhinoceros half the size of a pony. Ron heard the man's voice clear as anything inside his head, just behind his ears. "We've got him! Headquarters! Quick!"

Ron bolted up, and then promptly fell over again in the wet grass and mud. His numb legs went all pins and needles, except for his feet that felt as if they'd been flayed open. "Raging bloody hell!" he called out between gritted teeth. A few second later Harry came sliding in beside him.

"Are you hurt?" Harry demanded as he ran toward Ron. "What happened?"

Ron shook his head. "Patronus. Shacklebolt–"

"Yeah, I saw it, too. But you–"

"Fine," Ron choked out. "Give me a boost."

Harry helped him up, and once they were concealed behind the old barn, the two of them Apparated back to the alley on Grimmuald Place.

The manse, when they arrived, was abuzz with activity. Dozens of Order members were gathered in the basement kitchen, drinking mulled wine and blue bottles of Zombini's. Trays of food floated slowly around, and people picked off them as they passed. There were several huddles of people talking conspiratorially, one of which held Ron's mum and Bill and Elphias Doge. Ron made his way to them.

"There you are, poppin," Ron's mum said brightly. "You've heard the news, then? Isn't it wonderful? Elphias and Hestia found him, and called in Tonks and Kingsley for the capture. Did everything by the book, just like we'd planned!" Tonks and Shacklebolt were Aurors, of course, so it was important that they be the ones to make the formal arrest, or so it had been drilled into his and Harry's skulls. "You're father's there now filing the formal motion of complaint against him."

"That little wart," Doge grumbled. "Shot Hestia but good right in the face! But I held him off until the others could arrive."

"Never fear," Ron's mum added quickly, "Hestia will be fine in a couple of days. They've got her at St. Mungo's."

"And it was Draco Malfoy?" Ron questioned. "You're certain?"

"Couldn't be any more," Doge said smugly. "Saw the Dark Mark on his arm m'self. Caught him trying to break through the new protective hexes Moody put on the Burrow, see? Knew right away it'd be the little bugger."

Ron's eyes went wide, and shot to his mother. "He was at home?"

"Seems so," she said. "But don't you fret. Moody's work is top-notch, you know. We knew the moment he Apparated. Can't imagine what he'd want at our place, though. Unless he was trying to get at your father. I worry so much about him these days—" She stopped herself and offered Ron a broad smile. "But we got him, didn't we?"

"So, now what?" Harry asked, coming up behind Ron. He'd a butter beer in one hand and a small green ball of something in the other. He popped the food in his mouth and chewed.

"Hard to say," Bill said. "They've got to charge young Malfoy, and then Dad will be free to examine him as a hostile witness in Hermione's hearing."

"But still, she cast an Unforgivable," Ron anxiously said. "Capturing Draco doesn't change that."

"Ron," Harry said quietly, "Hermione didn't just cast an Unforgivable at a classmate, she was tortured by a Death Eater. Like the Longbottoms. With Draco present and accounted for, we now have real proof of that."

Ron's brows lifted. "So...it's all right to cast Unforgivables at Death Eaters?" Was this really a loophole he'd never heard of? The one they'd been hoping for?

Harry shifted from one foot to another. "Well, no. Not exactly. This is uncharted territory."

It was not the answer Ron had wanted. He grabbed Harry's beer and took a long, deep swig. Then he went in search of something stronger. With a couple of bottles tucked under his arm, Ron headed upstairs to Hermione's old room. He pulled out his wand, lit the fire in the fireplace, and settled down in the chintz chair nearby with his drink. Harry followed a couple of minutes later with some food. They didn't talk. They sat and drank through the night, Harry slouched against the overstuffed front of the chair and Ron with his legs flung over the rounded arms.

Despite everything that had happened, everything that had been done to him and by him, Harry was a good friend, Ron decided. The best.

Tonks woke them the next morning with a frown on her face, and holding the side of her belly while she muttered something about animals and wizards. She glanced over the empties that seemed to

have multiplied, as the two boys roused themselves, a little stiff and worse for wear.

"Time?" Harry asked, one hand on his forehead, and one on the back of his neck.

"Half an hour before the hearing is scheduled to begin, and Ron, I want you to come today, too."

This caught Ron's attention. "Really?"

She nodded. "With Draco in custody we're expecting fireworks." They arrived at the Ministry together, but Tonks sent Harry down to the judge's chamber before leading Ron back to the Night Room. There were half a dozen guards on duty this morning, monitoring all the different crystal balls that were, at this time of the morning, all fluttering with activity. Ron went straight to Hermione's orb, and he breathed in the sight of her. It was an awkward angle; mostly what he saw was the top of her head. But she was there. She kicked her foot against the wall in a slow, rhythmic way as she stood against the wall, arms crossed over her chest, still wearing the over-sized, striped prison robes. Why hadn't someone performed a shrinking spell on them? It wouldn't have taken more than a few seconds.

"I'm going down," Tonks told Ron. She peered over his shoulder at Hermione, studying her image for a moment. "Stay here until Kingsley comes for you, won't you?"

Ron absently nodded. She squeezed his shoulder.

Yes, something was going to happen, he could feel it. The street outside the Ministry, normally devoid of any signs of life, had been packed full of wizards and witches protesting with magical signs and shouts of "FREE THE HEROINE!" and "FORGIVABLE AGAINST DEATH EATERS!" and "SAVE HERMIONE TODAY!" There were more protesters gathered in the main atrium of the Ministry, though they were far more controlled and less vocal. They too wore magicked shirts and held signs, many with the brutal images of

Hermione just after her rescue. As Ron and Harry had passed they cheered. Well, they cheered for Harry, anyway.

Hermione had no idea that all of these people had turned out for her. How could she? They wanted to help her, wanted to see justice done. They wanted her to come home. Ron wanted her to come home. She'd been shut away since September. He reached up to touch the smooth surface of her orb. Hermione disappeared in a puff of smoke. Ron snatched his hand back. Had he done that?

In the largest crystal ball, suspended above the rest, the image flickered to life and there was Hermione again, in black and white, sitting in the chair, surrounded by a cone of bright light. One of the guards shoved an ear disk at him, and Ron quickly put it on.

The judge announced that Ron's dad could begin.

"Miss Granger, good morning."

She responded with a flat, "Good morning, Mr. Weasley."

"A lot has happened since last we met here, Miss Granger. Your kidnapper and torturer has been caught and is currently in custody here at the Ministry."

This news brought her to the edge of her seat, though after months of conditioning she was careful not to leave the chair entirely. "Here? He's here?" She looked terrified.

Ron couldn't see his father or his reaction to Hermione's almost panicked question, but his voice came in a reassuring tone. "You're quite safe, Miss Granger. His wand has been confiscated and a Muffle Charm has been put on him so he won't be able to cast any spells." This didn't seem to ease her anxiety much. "We do, however need to bring him before the judge now."

"Here?" she shrieked. "Now?"

Ron heard his father's voice lower, and compassion filter through. "Hermione, we have to do this. It's important."

She looked unconvinced, but she gave a little nod. Her chair was shoved to one side and then another large cloud of smoke appeared, and then cleared to reveal a second chair and occupant beside her. Malfoy's hair was a blinding white in the viewing globe, and Ron noted with satisfaction, that he was already chained to the chair. Draco blinked a couple of times, coughed at the remnants of smoke, and then turned and saw Hermione. A slow, morbid grin cracked his pale face. It twisted into a snarl. She shrunk back a little, turned her head away, and refused to look at him.

"Mudblood," Draco swore under his breath. "Disgusting, cowardly mudblood."

There was a general rumbled of shock from the on-lookers, before Ron's dad said anything.

"Draco Malfoy. You are accused of multiple castings of the Crucio Curse. Do you deny casing an Unforgivable?"

Draco's eyes darted out into the darkness, his pointed nose and chin came into stark relief. "There's no reason to deny it, blood traitor! It's not an Unforgivable if it's on a mudblood like her. She's not a real witch. And as far as I'm concerned, neither are you, Weasley. Blood traitor."

"You'll forgive me if I put very little weight in your opinion, I'm sure." Ron's father appeared in the spotlight, his arm and head reaching over the banister. He yanked Malfoy's sleeve up, and forced his arm to rotate in the chain cuff. There, for all to see, was the writhing tattoo of a skull swallowing a knotted snake. The room gasped at the sight of the Dark Mark. Ron, however, looked closer. It had cuts across it, and gouges around it, as if Draco had attempted to physically cut the Mark from his arm.

"Did you abduct Miss Granger under orders from You-Know-Who?"

Malfoy puffed out his chest. "Maybe I did!" The chair shocked the hell out of him, and Ron had to fight the urge to cheer it on. When Draco recovered, he strained against his bonds and screamed in outrage.

The chains held with little complaint. Hermione, through this, shrank even farther from him, curling herself as far over in the chair as possible. Ron had never seen her cower before. It twisted his heart in two.

Ron's father's voice was louder now, and more forceful, to compensate for the unrest in the room. "Did you abduct Miss Granger, torture her, and perform the Crucio Curse on her as a direct or indirect order from You-Know-Who?"

"Yes!" Malfoy shouted maniacally, but the chair got him again. Ron thought he could see little wisps of smoke rising from his head before it was done. "Rotten, bloody blood traitors!" he cried out in his anger and pain.

"I think from the chair's reaction, Mr. Malfoy, it's safe to assume you did not, in fact, act under the instructions of You-Know-Who. That your actions were your own."

Draco glared at him, breathing hard but saying nothing.

"Did you not understand the consequences for what you did? Specifically the Crucio Curse? Did you know that it was an Unforgivable? Do you lack the wit to know what that means?"

With a strangled guffaw, Draco barked, "DIE!" Immediately his lips were sucked inside his mouth, and then they disappeared completely.

The room erupted as the Muffle Hex took effect. There was a slam of something heavy hitting the ground, and the sound of mass panic filled. Ron couldn't make out what was happening. All he could see was Hermione screaming, though her voice was drowned out in the general hysteria filtering through his ear disk.

In the Night Room the guards jumped up cursing under their breaths, while they pressed and twisted the orbs. Both Draco and Hermione were smoked back to their cells – Ron found Hermione again in her smaller crystal ball, though now, without the chair to force her stillness, she ran to the door and pounded her fists against it.

The guards in the Night Room began the frantic process of locking down the entire Ministry.

"What's happened?" Ron demanded, but no one stopped to answer. There were calls going out for all available guards and Aurors to "report to level ten, Judge Rosmarus' chambers immediately!" In the large Orb Ron saw nothing but the banister that separated the dais from the room, and the over exposed white light. People still shouted, and above the rest Ron heard a voice that chilled him to his very core: his mother. Screaming.

"AAAAARTHUR!"

Ron strained but couldn't see anything beyond the darkness.

"Confirmed death," said one of the guards, pressing an ear disk against his head. "They're removing the body now. Open the doors."

Ron went cold. "W-who died?" he heard himself ask in a voice he didn't recognize as his own.

Again, no one paid him any mind.

In his ear disk Ron heard the judge's voice calling for order. He got little response. Shackbolt's voice boomed, but Ron couldn't make out what he was saying. His mother was crying. Weeping. Ron felt his legs go wobbly. He sank to his knees, watching the white ball, hoping that he was wrong.

"Sit down!" Shackbolt's command was the first utterance from the chamber that Ron could understand. "All of you! Sit!" The room began to quiet somewhat, and the sounds of crying became fainter.

The judge tried again. "Order!" This time he seemed to get his desired reaction. "I daresay that ends the defense examination. Bombridge, have you anything further to add?"

There was a pause, and a clearing of the throat. "No, your lordship," came a weak and shaky response.

"I've no need to deliberate on my sentence. Bring the accused back!"

And again Hermione appeared, seated, chest heaving as if she'd run all the way.

"In this case, in light of these circumstances, and with all of the evidence provided by Chancellor Xavier Bombridge of the Ministry of Magic's Department of Magical Law Enforcement, and Mr. Arthur Weasley of the Ministry's Detection and Confiscation of Counterfeit Defensive Spells and Protective Objects, I, Lord Philleas Farnsworth, III, having already established the guilt of Miss Hermione Jane Granger, and am ready to deliver her sentence.

"Because of given testimony, this court dismisses the charge of failure to report the misuse of an Unforgivable." He added in a sincere voice, "I daresay you gave it your all, my dear." Then the judge addressed the room again. "As for the second and first charges, the misuse of and Unforgivable Curse and intention to inflict bodily harm with an Unforgivable Curse – well, I'm sad to say that these charges stick."

Now both the judge's chambers and the Night Room became truly silent. Ron felt his chest cave in.

"It is because of the heinous nature of the crime, regardless of circumstances, that there must be some sort of imprisonment as part of the sentence. So, I do hereby sentence you, Miss Hermione Jane Granger, to two months in Azkaban Prison; sentence commuted as time already served. You were attacked by a Death Eater, and quite possibly acted with an Unforgivable in an attempt at self-preservation. For this reason alone I do not demand a more lengthy, if not indefinite stay. However, your admitted use of an Unforgivable - for whatever reason - can never, never be repeated. Therefore, from this day forward you are banned from carrying an Apparition license or a wand. Nor shall you be permitted to hold a position that would naturally be denied any wizard having once been incarcerated in Azkaban.

"I do not feel, at this time, that you are a danger to yourself, wizarding society, or the world at large, so as of this moment, with time served

and observation of the conditions of your release, you are, Miss Granger, now free to go."

There was a rush of voices again, many of them cheers, but Hermione didn't move. A hand came out of the darkness, then the arm, and Ron recognized them as Harry's. It took her a moment, but she reached out for him, and allowed him to pull her to her feet. They embraced fiercely, and Ron heard and saw the cameras flashing. Ron was shaking. Harry pushed her far enough away to hold her face in his hands, to kiss her forehead and then briefly her lips, and then she burst into tears, and he cradled her against him once more.

Hermione was safe. Ron's dad was not.

A broad, dark hand landed on Ron's shoulder, hoisted him up. Shacklebolt led Ron out of the room, and to St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. His mum was already there. She was crying, but trying to put on a brave face for her sons; Bill, Fred and George had already arrived.

"He's gone," she said. "They tried. None of them had ever heard of that curse, just 'Die' without a wand or anything and the person falls over...dead. It's not even Latin! They said there was no way to fight it. Nothing they could do." She dissolved into tears again, and Bill pulled her into a bear hug. "Ginny. She's to be coming home for the winter holidays tomorrow, anyway. Bill, you'll collect her, won't you? She's going to need someone strong to be with her on that ride home."

"Of course I'll go," Bill told her. "Tonight."

She nodded and her eyes landed on Ron. She reached for him, pulled him into a hug.

"I'm s-sorry, Mum," he said.

She sniffled a little and gave him a watery smile. She looked deep into his eyes. He had to look away. "Your father knew something like this could happen. We took all the precautions we could, but he knew what he was risking. This is not your fault, Ronald, so you just get that thought out of your head."

Of course, it was his fault. Everything that had happened as a result of his stupid quest for the Cup of Oaths was his fault. But he nodded to her anyway. His pain, he knew, couldn't be anything compared to hers.

"Have they postponed the hearing, then? We'll need to find Hermione a new advocate. Oh, dear," she said, seemingly overwhelmed by the thought.

Ron shook his head. "She's out. Free." This was all Ron could manage at the moment, but it was enough to start his mum sobbing again.

"That's a relief," she cried.

"Free?" asked Fred and George in unison. They'd all left with their father's body, and had missed the judge's sentence.

Ron nodded.

"Shall we go see her, then?" his mum asked. "She's likely to be in shock as well, and I'm sure she'd welcome some familiar faces." She reached up, and with her thumb wiped at the tears on Ron's cheek. "Bet you can't wait to see her. It's been ages."

"But Mum," Ron said. "Dad..."

"Yes, well," she turned a little and stared longingly at the door behind her. "I've said my good-byes. And I rather think I'm not quite ready to be alone yet."

He was in there. Behind the door. Ron's shoulders shook as a shiver wormed its way up his spine.

"Go on, son," she said encouraging. He opened the door, went inside.

The room was small. Cool and dark. It smelled of old potions and chemicals, and the Muggle cologne his father always wore. There was a narrow wood table, and his father was laid out on top, with a

clean white sheet covering him from head to toe. The shaking in Ron's shoulders got worse. He felt like he was floating. He ended up at his father's side, staring down at the creases in the cloth. He thought he should probably say something; tell his father's corpse that he'd been a good dad, that Ron loved him, that he was sorry. So very, very sorry. But there were no words.

They gathered at Headquarters. The mood was somber. Ron passed various members of the Order, and he was given repeated supportive cuffs on the shoulder. Everyone wore their black robes and talked in hushed tones. Ron walked with his head down, not wanting to make deliberate eye contact with anyone. He was herded to the kitchen where a drink was placed in his hands. Then he just wandered, not wanting to stand still long enough for someone to mistake his stillness of an invitation to come visit. Everything seemed very dream-like to Ron, as if the world might simply dissolve at the sound of an alarm.

He found his way upstairs, and then into the parlor without even meaning to. Ron looked up when the room went completely silent. Everyone was staring at him, and at Hermione, he realized, who stood in a jumper and jeans near the blazing fireplace. Harry was beside her. She was frozen, just as he was, her face a mixture of misery and relief. He'd seen her in the orbs. He knew it had been much longer for her.

Her voice cracked around his name. "Oh, Ron."

He dropped his drink, and she handed hers off to Harry, and the two of them met in the middle of the room. She seemed to fly at him, and he caught her, crushed her to him, with her arms tight around his neck. He couldn't believe it was really her – that he was holding her, and she was squeezing him tight. He could hardly breathe around the hammering of his heart. His nose instantly filled with snot and his eyes with tears. Her hair was soft and fluffy, and he pressed his face into it, let it smooth over his lips.

People began talking again, quietly, respectfully, but Ron wasn't ready to release her yet. The emotional swell inside him was more than he could've even imagined. He didn't know how he could feel so much at once.

And when Hermione finally pulled away, he was unable to cope. He turned and left.

Harry found him hours later, up in his old room, drapes drawn, staring at nothing. Ron's mind had gone numb. There was a courtesy knock, but Harry let himself in when Ron didn't answer. "Things are breaking up downstairs. Fred and George are going to stay with your mum tonight at the Burrow. Hermione's here. So is Moody. He thinks there might be an...an attempt made on Hermione, so he's going to be around for a while."

This got Ron's attention. He sat up on one elbow. "She alright?"

"Yeah. Distant, though. Quiet. This has all been rather rough on her. And you," Harry added quietly.

"Yeah," Ron echoed.

"Er...I'm sorry about your dad, mate. Really sorry."

"Yeah. I know. Thanks." Ron lay back, his head found the warm dent in the pillow again. He closed his eyes, but didn't sleep at all that night.

When the meager sun finally found its way through the crack in the drapes, Ron pushed himself out of bed and went down to the kitchen for coffee. Bill and Ginny were there already, both red-eyed and puffy-faced. Ginny ran to him, hugged him, and then poured him a fat mug of tea from the kettle on the table.

"I need to get back to Fleur," Bill said once Ron had collapsed on the table bench. "Are we, do you know, are we going to have Christmas this year?"

Ron blinked at him, but Ginny said confidently, "Of course." It was the same voice, the same tone that Ron had heard come out of his mum all these years.

"Right, then," said Bill, "we'll be over for Christmas supper, then."

"Christmas?" asked Ron when Bill had gone.

"Tomorrow is Christmas Eve," Ginny clarified.

"Is it, now? It doesn't feel very Christmasy, does it?"

"No," Ginny agreed. "But you know dad. Christmas was his favorite. And he would expect us to celebrate, even without him."

Ron shook his head. "How can you know that?"

"I know my father," she said matter-of-factly. "And Ron," she added, reaching out to touch his hand. "So do you."

His brows lowered. Yeah. He supposed she was right. He imagined his father setting up the family Christmas tree, smiling all the while, and saying directly to Ron, "We got her back, son! Time for celebration!"

"It's too soon," Ron said.

"It could be months from now," Ginny said with a sincere sigh, "and it would still be too soon. I miss him already."

Harry came down a short time later and started a breakfast of eggs on toast and bacon. He also started the coffee, for which Ron was grateful. The smells brought Hermione down in borrowed pajamas that looked suspiciously like Harry's. Ginny rushed to her and the two embraced, and then dissolved into tears with the next breath. Ron sighed heavily. He'd had just about as much crying as he could stand, and if Harry hadn't at that exact moment put a plate of food in front of him, he might've gotten up and left.

By the time he was through half his breakfast Ginny and Hermione had made it back to the table. Harry had taken the seat beside Ginny, and Hermione sat too close to Ron. He felt like he couldn't breathe properly. She didn't eat much. When she finished she rested her fist on the table top. It shook a little. Ron smoothed his hand over hers.

"You're freezing," he whispered to her. She shivered. When he glanced up from her hand he caught her staring at him. Her eyes lowered to his mouth, and a basic, primal panic shot through him. Heart pounding, Ron muttered something about needing to see to the shop and he was out the door and in Hogsmeade long before his pulse began to slow.

Christmas was a quiet affair that year, but not without its own share of subdued laughter. Harry and Ron had moved into the Burrow for a while, along with Ginny and Fred and George, so the house felt full to the brim with bodies and activity, even when they did nothing more than lounge by the old wood stove and listened to music. Hermione arrived just after afternoon tea, having spent a day and a half with her parents. She didn't say much about her visit home when asked, except that her parents were relieved and happy to see her.

Bill and Fleur came for Christmas supper, as did Tonks and Lupin, and Moody, so the meal was informally eaten in the kitchen, den and wherever a seat could be found. Afterwards, they relaxed with tea and eggnog. Tonks sat on the smaller couch, leaning against her man, sleepily rubbing the side of her rounding belly.

Hermione smiled at her. "That reminds me," she said. "Which one of you idiots told Mr. Weasley that I was carrying Harry's Love child?"

Eggnog shot from Harry's nose. Fred and George cheered, and gave Hermione a thumbs-up.

"I...uh...that was me," Ron eked out. He sat on the floor in front of her chair, his back against one of her legs. Her other leg bent, and a socked foot cuffed him in the back of the head.

"He went all red and purple trying to ask me without actually asking me if I was pregnant. It took me forever to decipher his vacuum and toaster metaphor. I think he felt I should relate because my parents are Muggles or something, but I don't think he quite understood the purpose of a toaster."

This brought additional laughter from the Wealsey children who were quite familiar with their father's veiled attempts at explaining the

sexual ways of the world to his children. It felt good to think about his dad this way, even when the ache of losing him was so fresh. Everyone there knew him and missed him, and somehow that knowledge – while not lessening the hurt - made it bearable.

A knock on the door sobered the room instantly, and both Moody and Bill jumped up with their wands already in their hands. Ron saw Lupin whip his wand out as well, but he remained next to Tonks while Bill and Moody slowly crept toward the door ready to blow it to bits. Bill was the first to peer through the kitchen window, and therefore the first to relax his wand.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"Uh..." It was a male voice, deep but young. "Terry Boot. Ginny Weasley gave me this address—"

"Terry?" Ginny jumped up and bolted for the door. Not even a second later Harry jumped up as well, though his feet remained firmly planted on the old, braided rag rug. "What are you doing here?"

"Uh...me mum, she read about your da in the paper, and I thought, well, I'm sorry..." A mittened arm thrust a fist full of sickly-looking, snow-covered flowers at her. "I didn't know there'd be armed guards or I would've sent an owl ahead."

"You should've sent an owl instead!" she snapped, though Ron could tell she was trying to keep her voice hushed. "I told you to write—"

"But...I was worried...and, well, you're my girl-"

Before he could get another syllable out she shoved him hard out the door, grabbed her coat from the peg tree, and followed him. Harry took a step like he meant to follow, then remembered himself, and simply stood in place fisting and unfisting his hands.

"You all right, Harry, dear?" asked Ron's mum. She wore a smirk, but hid it behind her tea cup.

He spun around to Ron. "Terry Boot? She's dating Terry? He's the bloke?"

Ron shrugged. The last thing he wanted to do was get involved in Harry making an ass of himself over his little sister. Moody and Bill returned, and Tonks went back to her plate of Yule cake. Ron rather thought she had the right idea.

"But...but he's in Ravenclaw!" Harry said, exasperated.

Hermione chimed in with, "That wasn't a problem when you were interested in Cho."

"But that was...she was...Cho." Slowly some memory filtered through Harry's jealous haze that widened his eyes and he turned back to the door. "Mrs. Weasley, are you sure you're comfortable with her out there? Alone with him? Alone?"

"Well, she is sixteen now, and I suppose if she's already dating him than they've probably done a bit of snogging." She seemed to be seriously weighing Harry's question. "But, it's snowing out there, and my Ginny is a smart girl. So, I doubt she'd drop her drawers - even for Terry Boot - in the middle of a snowstorm," she ribbed.

Harry went a little green to the delight of George and Fred, and if he was completely honest, Ron a little as well. "Yes, well," said Harry. "He is her boyfriend, I suppose...isn't he?" He looked to Hermione now and gave her a questioning look.

"The last I heard they were thick and thieves," Hermione said. "But then, that was months ago. I'm sure they've had plenty of time to get even closer. He's the new Ravenclaw Keeper. I'm told he's spectacular."

Ron craned his neck around to see Hermione's expression. Yes, the smirk he heard in her voice was most certainly hanging on the edge of her mouth. She was enjoying her torture.

"All right, Harry, don't get your knickers in a twist," Ron said. "Someone had to rescue Harry before he lost his head entirely. "She

didn't invite him in to meet the family, did she? She didn't even look too happy to see him, if you ask me. I'm sure he's nothing too serious to her."

"Right," said Harry. He continued to stare at the door.

"Boys," Hermione grumbled under her breath. She took a big swallow of her mulled wine.

Tonks gave a little gasp of discomfort and rubbed the side of her belly.

"Oh, kicking again, is it?" said Ron's mum. "That one will be a Beater for sure! Bill kicked my liver black and blue—"

"Mum, I was never a Beater," Bill said, rolling his eyes and smirking to his wife. Fleur, for the most part, seemed content to sip her wine and play absently with Bill's ginger ponytail. Ron loved the way her fingers moved.

"Well, no, but you would've made a lovely Beater. I always said that."

"Yes, you did always say that," he agreed.

"Could never get you on the Quidditch pitch, though. You father and I thought for sure you were afraid to fly, but when you turned out to be a zip on the broom, we had to accept that you just weren't interested in Quidditch."

"Really? I don't recall either of you coming to that kind of acceptance when I dropped the Gryffindor team my seventh year. And for two people who didn't play Quidditch yourselves—"

"Oh, Bill!" she said to hush him. "You know very well your father played at school until he hurt his back."

"How did he do that again?" George asked.

"Well, he'd bewitched a Muggle floor cleaner, thinking it would fly the same as a good, old-fashioned wizard's broom. Fell thirty feet. Sprites abound! I thought that was the end of him there, but Madame

Lickswitch managed to fix him up. She was never as good as Madame Pomphrey, but when your father and I were at Hogwarts Pomphrey hadn't come on yet. Lickswitch was, well now, near a hundred, had to be. Blind as a bat, too."

"What year were you when dad took the dive?" Ron asked.

"Seventh year. It was just before your father and I took our N.E.W.T.s. Gave us plenty of time to study, though, with him laid up in the infirmary." Her gentle smile fell, as did fresh tears. "'Sorry," she mumbled through a handkerchief, and hurried out of the room, and up the stairs.

Tears prickled Ron's own eyes. He took a few swallows of his eggnog, and tried to think of anything but his father. It was difficult.

"Diz baby," Fleur said, with a graceful hand gesture toward Tonks' stomach. "It ez a boy? Oui? A girl?" Ron got lost for a moment in that swish of her hand. He'd forgotten how pretty Fleur was, how graceful. How wonderful...

Tonks' voice brought him out of it. "We don't know yet." She smiled and rubbed the side of her belly.

"Of course you do." It was Hermione's voice, but hard and sharp as flint. It shocked Ron, and he looked bug-eyed to Harry, who had found his seat again on the sofa. Harry, too, was surprised and gave Hermione a concerned look. Tonks, to whom the comment was directed, just lifted her brows.

Hermione sighed. "Your hair. It's blue."

Lupin leaned back a little from Tonks and examined her hair. "It's been blue for a while now," he said.

Tonks screwed up her eyes, and for a moment it went the shade of bubblegum. But only for a moment. "It doesn't want to stay," she said with a shrug. "But I like it blue."

"Baby blue," Hermione said.

"What?" Tonks whispered. Her face went stony, and for a moment hard to read.

Hermione didn't need to repeat herself; Lupin did it for her. "Baby blue?" he whispered. "A boy?" He looked down at the mound of baby, and placed his hand over Tonks'.

"You know, I reckon she might be right," Tonks said, a grin beginning to spread across her face. "I've had this feeling..."

"A BOY!" George and Fred yelled in unison. "That's a lucky break," George continued to Lupin. "Congrats, mate!"

Bill and Fleur offered their congratulations as well, but Lupin didn't seem to hear them. He and Tonks stared, stunned, into each other's eyes, and Ron looked away when the sappy moment became too much for him. He found himself staring at Fleur. Hermione footed him in the back of the head again.

Harry strained his neck to see through the curtains and snow. "I thought the two of you made up," Hermione said to him. "You seem to be getting on now."

Harry glanced from the window to Hermione, and then back again. "We're getting on," he muttered, somewhat defensively.

"Did you talk?" Hermione asked, pointedly. "Work things out? Did you explain?"

Harry made a face and sat back again. "Never mind," he said. "It doesn't matter."

"Of course it matters!" There was real irritation in Hermione's voice now, and she sat forward, poised for attack. "If you don't want her dating Terry, then you bloody well better do something about it!"

Harry shook his head. "The reason I stopped seeing her...nothing's changed. She's better off with that git – safer – than with me."

"Oh for the love of magic, Harry!" This time it was Tonks' exasperation. "Let her make that decision for herself, why don't you? You wizards always try to decide what's best for us, when we're perfectly capable of making that choice ourselves! And why, I ask you? Why? Eh? Can you tell me that?" She shot a glare at Lupin before turning back to Harry. "If you don't want to see her, that's one thing, Harry. But if you do – and you know she wants to see you – then you can't lock her out of a relationship just because it's uncomfortable for you!"

Lupin put a hand on her arm, and whispered, "He's not me, sweet. Ease up a little."

"But he's doing just what you did – don't call me sweet! And aren't you glad you came to listen to reason?"

"Outrageously," Lupin said. "But Harry is his own man, luv. Let him find his way–"

"Here, here," seconded Ron.

"Don't be silly," snapped Hermione. "Without a little prodding Harry will wait until the very last second to act, and then it will be too late!"

"Too late? For what? She's not getting married, is she?" Harry asked, sarcastically.

"Well, she is sixteen, don't forget, and they've been going together for months now," said Hermione suggestively.

"And?" said Harry.

"And? How long did it take you and me?" she bluntly asked.

Harry blushed and looked at the ground; Fleur hid a smirk behind a slender hand. Pursed his lips and refused to look at Hermione.

"Never mind," Harry snapped. He thrust his fists into his jeans, and muttered to Ron, "I'm going to see to your mum."

"The window in Ginny's room has a great view of the garden swing!" Hermione called after him.

"You're horrible," Tonks told her laughing once Harry was up the stairs.

"Teasing him isn't going to help," said Bill with a shake of his head. "That poor bloke doesn't know whether he's coming or going when it comes to Ginny."

"I wasn't teasing," Hermione said. "I was giving him fair notice. There's no reason for Ginny to sit around moping when he's not made the least effort with her. And I tell you, she's a smart girl. She knows her worth and she's not going to wait forever. If Harry won't have her there are plenty of blokes out there who will. And good blokes, too! Terry Boot is smart and athletic and handsome, and I'm told he treats her very well indeed."

"He's not that handsome," Ron grumbled, not liking how she's said that: smart, athletic and handsome, like he was every girl's fantasy date or something.

Hermione sighed. "But you're right. Harry probably does think I was taking the mickey. I should go up and apologize. It's Christmas, after all." She shifted, and Ron felt her slip past him. She wore a red dress-thing that showed her knees, and Ron's gaze followed them as she went up the stairs.

Just before she was out of sight completely, she added, "And you know, I'm a smart girl, too."

All eyes in the room turned to Ron. What had he missed? "Wha'?" he asked, and when no one answered him he finished off his eggnog.

End of chapter 11

Chapter 12 – Grief In Five Stages, In His Father's Shoes

Christmas night Ron lay on his back in bed, staring at the ceiling, contemplating his full belly and the rest of the Yule Log that was waiting downstairs for someone to eat it. In years past that has been his father's domain – the polishing off of the Yule Log. It was hard to accept that there was still half a cake down there, and would be come morning.

"What do you think they're talking about down there?" Harry asked, from his perch on the other bed. He stared down through the floor as if to see through to Ginny's room two levels down.

"Don't know," Ron said, and he didn't much care, either. Now that the sun had gone down and Christmas was pretty much over, his father's absence was more sorely felt. And the guilt was stronger. It just didn't seem right somehow that Ron could lay there, whole and intact, his stomach happily digesting away, his Fate back in its rightful place, and Hermione safe, while his father's body lay in suspension until his funeral the following week. It was hard to think beyond that; beyond the grief and guilt and his father never tucking in to another Yule Log.

"Girls talk about blokes, don't they?" Harry didn't really expect an answer, did he? Apparently not, because he carried on with his conversation without one. "And Terry Boot. Dating him is near on dating Neville, isn't it?"

"She dated Neville," Ron reminded him. "Yule Ball, Fourth Year."

"Shut up."

"And anyway, what's wrong with Neville?" asked Ron. He sat up, stretched his legs across to the other bed, and stuffed a pillow between his back and the wall. "He's not much to look at, granted, but then neither am I. Girls aren't as shallow as we are, lucky for us, or else I'd have no hope."

"No hope," Harry said with a huff. "What are you on about? You're Fated."

Ron shrugged. He didn't see why that would help him if Hermione decided she wanted a pretty face. In fact, he didn't see why Harry would assume anything about Hermione and him just because they were Fated. Harry had been right when he'd said that Ron had spent his entire life Fated to Hermione, and not once had he so much as held her hand. Of course, now he'd kissed her twice, but those hardly counted, as she was Harry's at the time. Ron liked knowing Hermione was his now, as long as he didn't actually have to do anything with her. He was too overwhelmed with everything else at the moment to even think about Hermione like that. And whenever he caught her staring at him it was as if she expected him to do something or say something, but there was nothing in his head anymore except his mum crying and his dad on that table in St. Mungo's, under the sheet.

Harry shook his head in frustration. He was still in his own teenage thoughts. Suddenly Harry seemed too young and immature. "I just reckoned," Harry said, "given all the blokes Ginny could go out with, she'd choose someone..."

"What? More like you?" Ron asked, irritated. Why didn't he just shut up?

"No!"

"Less like you, then?" Ron needed.

"No!"

"Well, don't bite my head off – I'm not the one snogging Terry Boot!"

Harry threw a shoe at Ron, and then dove for his bag under the bed. Ron watched as he rummaged through it. He wished Harry would just lie down and go to sleep so Ron wouldn't have to talk anymore. Or think. Instead, Harry tossed aside clothes and a belt before he pulled out his Christmas gift from George and Fred - the newest model Extendable Ears. Unlike the previous incarnations, these Extendable Ears didn't have a long, fleshy cord that was likely to get knotted and tangled. Instead, there were two small, pill-shaped ear pieces and a homing ear that crawled along the floor or walls until it found its target.

"You're going to listen in on Ginny and Hermione?" It seemed a childish thing to do.

"Listening to you is getting me nowhere," Harry darkly quipped.

He put one of the ear pieces in, but Ron reached out to stop him. Someone was going to get hurt, and Ron didn't think he'd survive that conversation. "Are you sure, mate? What if she says something you don't want to hear?"

"Like what?" Harry demanded.

"Like she's bagging Terry Boot."

"She's sixteen!" Harry insisted. "She's not bagging anyone!"

"Well, then," Ron said, changing tactics, "what if she says she's over you?" It was an entirely possible and ugly reality to face on Christmas night.

This gave Harry pause. "Then, I suppose, it's best if I know," he said, though Ron wasn't quite sure he meant it. Harry offered Ron an ear piece, and he hesitated before taking it. Harry was looking at him, and Ron couldn't let him eavesdrop alone. No bloke should have to hear bad news on his own.

For a long moment there wasn't any sound at all, and Ron wondered if Ginny had thought to put a Silencing Spell on the door. Would a spell on the door cover the gaping hole above it that had never been fixed? Then, one of them coughed a little – Ron thought it was probably Ginny – and there was a sigh.

"It doesn't really matter," Hermione said quietly, sadly. "It's not like I'm...well, like I was. I'm more or less a Squib now. A Muggle, really. And I can't imagine Ron ever wanting a Muggle. I don't think it would even occur to him. And I can't really blame him."

"Well, I bloody well can!" Ginny snapped. "He was all over you before, when you and Harry were...you know."

"Well, he's not now. He won't stay in a room with me long enough to even talk, and...I don't know, Ginny. I just think, maybe I don't belong here anymore. I can't do magic. I'm useless. It might be better for everyone – easier – if I went back to Kent-"

"What?"

"Listen. There's so much going on right now, and going to be going on, and Ron's in the thick of it because of his Smisurato abilities. And he's got your dad's passing to deal with, and I'm sure he blames me a little for that–"

"No!" Ginny insisted. "None of us do! That's not even open for discussion."

There was a moment of silence.

"Thank you," Hermione said. "Oh, Ginny, I'm so sorry about him. Honestly, I..."

There was a muffle of moving bedclothes and squeaking beds and the wet sound of runny noses and crying. Ron pulled his Extendable Ear out, unable to take any more emotional outbursts when his own emotions were so raw. And anyway, Hermione would never live like a Muggle again. A witch as brilliant as her living without magic? Who did she think she was kidding? Not that he'd mind if she'd take holiday for a week or so, just to give him a little breathing space for a while. The hearing had left her clingy, and in the worst sort of way. Just like with Ginny now, Ron realized, she needed constant reassurances that the old Hermione never needed.

Yes, he was glad Hermione was free and safe, and he was relieved that Moody was around to protect her and the rest of the family, but Ron would much rather have them all go away so he could be by himself. Interacting with people, even his favorite people, was just a bit more than he thought he could handle at the moment. He stared at Harry just feet from him, and wished him away as well. Which wasn't really fair, as he knew that the Burrow was the closest thing to a real home Harry had ever known, and if Harry weren't kneeling with his fingers pressing the ear piece further into his ear on the other bed in

Ron's room, then he'd be alone at number 12, and on Christmas, which would just be cruel.

Well, Ron was feeling a little cruel, he reckoned, though generous, too, as he didn't say anything and Harry got to stay. Ron congratulated himself on this.

Harry pulled his ear piece out and looked at it glumly. Then he considered Ron. "Do you blame her?" he asked. It was a simple question with a very complicated answer.

"What?" Ron asked, stalling.

"Hermione. Do you blame her for what happened to your dad?"

"Oh. No," Ron said. "That wouldn't be reasonable, would it?" He blamed himself. He was angry at himself, and Draco. And yes, perhaps at Hermione, too. And he was mad at his dad, he decided. If Moody or Kingsley had Polyjuiced up that morning, surely they would've been able to deflect the curse. Surely. And even if they couldn't...well, Ron would still have his father. And more importantly, his mum would have him, too. And then Ron wouldn't mind that there were so many bloody people around because he wouldn't want to be by himself; and he wouldn't feel the guilt gnawing him from the inside.

"You've been avoiding her," Harry said, now looking at his knees and playing with the Extendable Ear piece. "When she gave you your gift this morning you ran out of the room."

"I never ran!" Ron indignantly insisted. "And anyway, I had to use the loo."

"Today when we were straightening up, when she was on the ladder, you saw her wobble, I know you did because you reached out to steady her legs, but then pulled your hands away at the last second and didn't touch her."

"She didn't fall, did she?"

"What's going on with you? Just a few days ago you were itching to see her—"

"Nothing," Ron said again, now more petulant. If Harry was going to stay in his room, the least he could do was be agreeable. He didn't pressure Harry, why shouldn't Harry return the favor? "I know! All right? I...I just don't know."

"You Love her, Ron. We all know it. You don't have to pretend—"

"Who's pretending?" Ron demanded. "Just...what are they saying now?"

He didn't care, really, but anything to get the conversation off him. If Ron didn't want to touch her, or stand around while she looked at him, expecting him to kiss her, it was nobody's business but his own. And she did expect things now that she knew they were Fated, which wasn't fair at all! They'd never really been dating, after all, and he'd never asked her to be his girlfriend. Ron didn't want a girlfriend. He wanted everything to go back to the way that it was. At Hogwarts. When they were children. He didn't want to miss her so desperately when she wasn't close, and he certainly didn't want to notice how good she smelled as she walked by, or that she hardly ate at supper when his father would never eat supper again.

Harry stuffed the ear piece back in his ear. Ron followed his lead.

"All I'm saying is..." This was Hermione's voice. "If you fancy Harry, and you know now that Harry's, well, available, then—"

"No!" snapped Ginny. "I'm always picking up the pieces when it comes to him. If he wants me he knows where to find me. Until that time—"

"You're going to get your oats from Terry Boot?"

Ginny giggled. "Well, he'd like to. We've got close a couple of times, but, well..."

Harry's eyes went wide, and the blood drained from his face. Ron thought he might be sick for a couple of moments. "She almost? With Terry? Terry Boot? How close is close? What does that mean?"

"Give Harry another chance," Hermione urged. "He's worth it. And he's really very good, you know...worth the effort. Knows all the right bits, if you know what I mean. He does this thing with the back of your knee—"

"Hermione!" Ginny gasped, scandalized, and then the both of them dissolved into giggles.

Harry went red and made to pull out Ron's ear piece, but Ron was too quick and he held it up just out of Harry's reach. "Come on! I'm not listening! Like I want to hear about your sexual exploits with my girl."

"Right!" said Harry, abandoning his attempt at getting Ron's ear piece. "She's your girl! Hermione is your girl! So, why are you so stand-offish around her? Can't you see it's breaking her heart?"

"I'm not!" Ron said, and collapsed down on the bed. Harry dropped on the other, and they glared at each other. "She expects things, all right? Because we're Fated, she expects me to – I don't know – be her boyfriend or something. I don't like that."

"You expect her to be your girl."

"No I don't!"

"You just said she was your girl!"

"Piss off!"

"Maybe if you just talk to her—"

"I don't want to talk to her!" Ron shook his head. "Have you ever come out ahead when talking with Hermione? She's sharp as a razor, that one, and she'd have me planning a wedding before she'd even need to come up for air."

Harry cocked his head to one side. "It's not because of her wand, is it? Because this is Hermione we're on about."

"Enough!" Ron snapped, and flopped backwards on his bed. Harry obviously didn't understand.

Harry slid down into a slouch against the wall and turned the ear piece over and over between his finger and thumb, probably contemplating whether to listen some more. "You know, you're only punishing yourself. Because she knows some good bits as well. Some very good bits. Must've found some books or something..."

Ron jumped up screaming and lurched on to Harry. He attacked him with pillows and blankets and a barbarian yelp until Harry called for mercy, and they were both breathless and exhausted. When at last they sank back into their respective beds with Harry laughing softly, Ron closed his eyes and sighed.

"I'm no good at Love, Harry. I don't want to be. Don't ask me to be."

"How could you not be? You've been surrounded by it your entire life. You're Love Fated. It doesn't make sense."

"No," Ron agreed. "It certainly doesn't." But there it was. The funeral was surreal as a nightmare. Hundreds of people attended, more than Ron thought his father could've possibly known. Order members were discretely helping to funnel the press away, but occasionally Ron would catch a flash from the corner of his eye. He didn't really care.

The sun was out, which seemed wrong, because the bitter chill in the wind cut through his clothes and hair. The trampled foot of snow that had fallen the night before crunched under Ron's shiny black shoes – his father's shoes. He'd been horrified when his mother had produced them, but she clucked at him for being silly. After all, Ron's dress shoes no longer fit, and these were perfectly lovely shoes only worn once at Bill and Fleur's wedding; and anyway, his father had adored the shoes and would want Ron to have them. He stared down at

them, the black against the white, wet and cold and stiff. They fit perfectly.

McGonagall spoke, said some kind things about his father, as did Bill and Shacklebolt and Tonks. Tonks was the only one who didn't cry. Ron's mum throughout the service was stoic, and while a few tears did escape the corners of her eyes, she hadn't allowed herself to crumble. Ron knew she wanted to – he wanted to – but she remained strong. It was hard to appreciate as a child what an incredible woman his mother really was; now he was grateful. Not having to take care of her meant he could close himself off from the service a little, shield himself from the gentle, apologetic hands and whispers. After the service, once the crowd got up to pay their respects, Ron moved to a back row to be by himself. He avoided looking at the coffin, at the flowers, at the faces of his friends. He sat slumped on a chair, huddled against the winter, and waited for someone to come along and tell him it was all right to leave.

Ginny sat a few rows ahead of him. She cried all morning long, and her fair face was flush and swollen from the tears and the wind. Harry did his best to comfort her, though she was clearly inconsolable. Ron suspected this was the first real good cry she'd allowed herself. Knowing Ginny, it would probably be the last.

Hermione sat by herself a couple of aisles away. She wore a distant, sad expression, and Ron watched as she sighed and rose and shuffled to his father's coffin with a dozen dark purple grief orchids. She placed them gently next to the garden's worth of flowers slowly freezing on the polished oak lid. She whispered something, touched her fingers to the coffin. Then she turned and met Ron's gaze. His heart beat a little faster. She sat down right next to him. At least she wasn't crying.

"I've decided to move back to number 12 – give your mother some space. Your dad died defending me, after all. She doesn't need me there as a reminder," she said quietly, staring straight ahead at the others who had gone up to the coffin to pay their respects. "Moody will be at the Burrow for a little added security, and Tonks said she was going to move in for a couple of weeks for moral support. For

your mother," she added unnecessarily. "She asked what you were going to do. I told her I didn't know."

Ron didn't know, either.

"Ginny's got another week before her holiday is over," Hermione continued. "She was considering taking this term off, but I think your mum and I convinced her that would be a bad idea. It will be hard for her at Hogwarts, I'm sure, but staying home won't make the grief any easier to work through." She turned and considered him for a moment, and then looked back out over the people. A gust picked up her hair, and she pulled her dark cloak tighter around her. "How are you holding up?" she asked, sheepishly, as if she wasn't sure how he'd react to the question.

"Oh, I'm fine," he said. Grief, he decided, was an odd creature. It came and went. At the moment all he felt was cold. And he wanted to be alone.

"You can talk to me...you know? Ron, if you need—"

"I don't need anything," he said quickly, not wanting the conversation to get any closer to feelings or crying or anything remotely personal. "I don't want anything."

"Yes," she said, almost to herself. "You're making that abundantly clear." She sighed, wiped at her cheek, and then said, "I'm sorry, Ron. For everything, but mostly for your dad. It's horrible, and I'm sorry."

Ron shrugged. "Me, too."

She got up then, and before she left she kissed him on the cheek. His chest tightened and a lump lodged itself in the back of his throat. Tears flooded his eyes. He grabbed her shoulders roughly and pressed his mouth to hers. He almost instantly regretted it. The passion and sexual charge from the last kiss they'd shared at Headquarters was missing, and in its place was a confused sort of need. She pulled away with a look of concern on her pale face. He let her go, and she reached out to touch his chest, but he flinched away from her. Fated or not, it had been a mistake to have kissed her there

at his father's funeral. He didn't even know why he'd done it. He wished he hadn't. Miserable and cold, he hung his head and slouched again. Hermione walked away.

Later he Apparated back to the Burrow with his mother, Tonks, and Moody. Every surface of the kitchen and den were covered with pots, cauldrons or platters of food, or else flowers: the badges of mourning.

"I suppose we won't have to cook for a while," his mother said, though the prospect didn't seem to cheer her. "Don't know where I'll put it all."

"I'll take care of it, Molly," Tonks said. "Why don't you go have a lie down and let me straighten things up down here? Then we'll have some tea and see if you're ready to eat something."

"Yes, all right," Ron's mum said. "And Ronnie, you'll help, yes? Don't let her pick up anything too heavy."

"I'm fine," Tonks assured, but Ron nodded to his mother anyway.

Moody went out to secure the perimeter – conveniently, Ron thought – and so for the next hour he helped Tonks clear out the downstairs.

Supper was a pot of spaghetti and crusty bread, and treacle pudding for dessert. Ron excused himself when the Firewhiskey was pulled out. The last thing he wanted to do was drink when he felt like he did. Odds were he'd end up in a crying jag that would outlast the alcohol. Instead he headed up to his room, but stopped to peek into Ginny's. He knew Hermione's stuff would be gone, but still, it was something of a relief to see its absence. The thought of dealing with her, after what he'd done at his father's funeral, was more than he could handle at the moment. But with her at Harry's, well, he'd have some space. And she was safe enough there. Ron just couldn't be responsible to her. Not now.

He went back down to the den where his mum and Tonks had retired, each wrapped in a soft blanket, and asked where Ginny was. It hadn't even occurred to him that she hadn't followed them home from the funeral until now.

"Harry's, I think. Said she wanted a little room to breathe before she came back here. Why don't you join them, dear? Be with your friends for a while."

"I'll be here," Tonks assured him. "Don't worry about your mum. But do try to get Hermione to talk a little. It will do her a world of good."

"But I don't want to talk to her," Ron said.

"Have another row?" Ron's mum asked. "Honestly, Ron, she's delicate these days. After everything she's gone through, and now she's grieving, you'd think the least you could do is be nice to her."

"I'm grieving!" Ron insisted.

"She'll be worrying about where she fits in now that she doesn't have a wand, you know," Tonks added. "And she'll need reassurances from you."

"About what?"

"About what?" his mother echoed, incredulous. "Honestly, Tonks, sometimes I don't think I did right by these boys. Not a stitch of empathy in the lot of them!"

"Tell her you don't care that she can't use a wand anymore," Tonks said. "Let her know you still Love her."

For a moment Ron stared at Tonks without blinking. "That's none of your business," he said bluntly, then turned and left.

Ron let himself in to the manse, and immediately froze. A pain-filled groan floated in from the parlor. Ron held his breath, and another moan followed. He whipped out his wand, and as Ron crept toward the half-closed doors his heart hammered in his throat. Number 12 was supposed to be the most heavily, magically protected building in Britain, next to the Ministry. Had the Death Eaters infiltrated? Moody was sure there would be an attack – either retaliation for Draco, or to prove to the world that what Draco was able to do within the Ministry walls they could do everywhere else. A half dozen jinxes and counter curses ran through Ron's head, but he kept stumbling over the idea

that whatever it was in there had already attacked and presumably incapacitated Harry, and possibly one of the girls if he was hearing correctly. Ron pressed his shoulder against the door, closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and then he screwed up his courage. He threw the sliding doors open.

The sight that greeted him was more horrific than he'd anticipated. Harry was half naked, as was Ginny, who had her bare legs wrapped around his middle. The two of them were going at it, kissing and groping and thrusting all at once. Ron yelped.

"Get out!" Harry barked through gritted teeth. He was flushed and sweating, and he didn't look like he was about to stop.

"Out!" Ginny echoed, and then groaned again, though it was apparent now she was in anything but pain.

Ron fled, and not able to think yet, took the stairs. A flicker of firelight created shadows outside Hermione's room, and Ron wandered dazed in that direction.

She was sitting in the overstuffed chair, quill in hand, scratching away at Viktor's book. Ron began to shake. Harry and Ginny downstairs, and Hermione and Viktor up here. His head began to throb. He needed to get as far away as possible.

"Oh. Ron." Hermione slipped the book between the cushion and the arm of the chair and then stood. "They were talking things through downstairs, so I thought I'd come up to give them a little privacy."

"You gave them too much," he said. His throat was oddly tight and his voice scratchy.

"They're not getting on, then?" she asked with a frown.

"They're shagging!" Ron blurted.

"Oh! Well, then, I reckon they worked everything out."

"You reckon?" Ron repeated with disgust. "She's sixteen! You should've stayed down there! You know how Ginny fancies him! Sixteen!"

Hermione shrugged. "Harry's seventeen. They're only a couple of months apart, really."

"Thirteen months! And...and what if...if he knocks her up?" They shouldn't be having sex, Ginny had a bloke already! She and Harry were broken up – had been for months! "It's not right!"

Hermione rolled her eyes and waved a dismissing hand. "Ginny's prepared," she said. "After all, she's been seeing Terry, hasn't she?"

"What?" No, no, no, his mind was screaming. It didn't want to know any of this. Ginny had not bagged Terry Boot. Almost, she'd said, but that wasn't the same thing! His stomach knotted, and Ron thought for a moment that he was going to go and beat the living magic out of Terry. Or vomit.

"But you're right," Hermione continued. "No protection is completely fool-proof. What if he did manage to get her pregnant? Would that really be so bad? It wouldn't be the end of the world, now would it?" Her gaze was steady, defiant.

"Yes!"

"Oh, come now," Hermione said. "Harry's got money, he's got a house. He wouldn't abandon her. Your mum's supportive. And Ginny, she's nearly done with Hogwarts—"

Ron interrupted her. "I don't want babies!" His whole being was humming with anger and frustration and shock. He didn't know where the words had come from, but the thought had been bouncing around inside him ever since that morning down in the kitchen when he thought Hermione was going to kiss him. He was trapped in this relationship dictated by the Fates. And it irked him that Hermione didn't seem to mind; one would think after the fiasco with Harry she'd be a little perturbed about being Fated.

Hermione froze for a moment, and then turned and considered him. "Ever?" she asked. "You don't want babies, not ever?"

"Not ever." He was fairly sure that wasn't what she wanted to hear, but it was best to have it out there anyway. Best to tell her how it was going to be.

"Well," she said slowly, carefully. "Well, I reckon that's your choice." She turned now, looked up at the books lining her shelves, then over at the wide bed wedged into one of them. "I do want a baby," she told him. "A whole house full of them. Not now, of course, I don't want to be a teen mother. Maybe in ten or fifteen years. After I've an established career and a husband. After Voldemort." She looked at him now, imploring. "But I do want them. Very much."

"Not mine."

"Clearly."

He turned to go, but then remembered what was happening downstairs. He was trapped – with Hermione. Blast it all! It was all wrong! Why didn't anyone else see that? Why didn't she see it? "They're not even Fated," he grumbled.

"What good is being Fated? Not like it's done us any favors, has it?" she said, a sharp edge to her voice. She plopped angrily back down in her chair and pulled out the history of Azkaban once more. "But Fated or not, Harry loves her, and she loves him. They should be together!"

"Love," Ron said with a sarcastic huff.

"You were certainly singing another tune when you kissed me those times," Hermione bit out, her face red with anger.

"Yeah, well." He'd been daft and jealous, and the hole in his soul had made him a bit mental. And then she'd been gone and he'd been so very worried for her, terrified really, but now she was safe and standing there looking at him like he was made of rubbish. "I never said anything about love."

Hermione's face went scary blank, and her voice was low and steady when she said, "No. I see now that you didn't."

He'd gone too far. He knew it almost instantly. He'd wanted to push her back a little, to give himself some breathing room. Babies, she'd said! She wanted his babies! He shoved his hands into his jeans pockets and glared at the floor. "You only expect me to snog with you now, and be all soft, because we're Fated. It's not fair. If we weren't Fated—"

"We are Fated, Ron Weasley. And I don't expect anything from you. Not anymore. So, you can just go back to being your own guest of honor at that pity party you're throwing!"

"My father is dead!" he screamed at her.

"You think I don't know that? You think I didn't watch him die while he was there defending me? You think that I have to be reminded that I'm the reason your mother's a widow?"

"It's not about you! It's about me!"

That shut her up. But only for a moment. "Funny, but I'm pretty sure your mother feels differently about that. And Ginny, downstairs. With Harry. I doubt she thinks it's all about you."

"You just shut up about them!"

"And why should I?" she challenged.

"Because I'm not him! I'll never be HIM! I DON'T WANT TO LOVE YOU!"

He expected her to burst into tears, or to yell at him some more – call him a selfish what-not. He didn't expect her to take a deep breath, like she was breathing in the cold winter air outside, and he didn't expect her to meet his eyes when she said, "I know," as if she was almost relieved to hear him say it. She didn't turn away, didn't waver in her stance, and it drove Ron from the room.

He went down the hall, and into his old, dark room. He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror, pale as a ghost, and scowling. He looked in pain. "You're a sorry git," he told himself.

"Good to be honest to yourself, at least," Lucy said happily. "But try smiling, dear, it'll make you look younger."

"Sod off," he told the mirror. She only chuckled.

Ron woke in the morning, still fully dressed. The manse smelled of strong coffee, and it pulled him down stairs to the kitchen. Harry was in there with Moody and Lupin. Breakfast hadn't been started, but when Ron dropped down at the table Lupin poured him a large, steaming mug.

"We thought we'd resume lessons tomorrow night," Lupin said conversationally. "If you think you're up to it?"

Ron realized that Lupin was talking to him. "Oh. Right. Yeah, it's fine."

"And, we've got to find the last of the Horcruxes," Moody told them, his voice still gruff from sleep. "They've been put off far too long. Thought I'd put Hermione to that task."

"Finding the Horcruxes?" Harry asked, concerned.

Ron leaned close to Harry. "You told him about the Horcruxes?" Harry waved him away.

"Hermione can research," Lupin said with a nod. "Without her wand, she won't benefit any longer from our evening lessons. She'll be a distraction."

Harry didn't seem at all pleased with this. Ron, on the other hand, felt relieved. Their row the night before still had him twitching.

"Have you told Hermione?" Harry asked.

"We should discuss it," Lupin agreed. "Is she upstairs?"

Harry shook his head. "I reckon she's gone back to the Burrow. With Ginny," he added, and a wide, dreamy grin grew across his face.

Lupin noticed, but it was Moody whose brows furrowed. Ron pressed the heel of his hands into his eyes in an attempt to drive the image of Harry on his sister away. It had been a horrible night all around.

"Then let's head that way. I want to see Tonks anyway. Odd how we come to miss them so very much." Lupin eyed Ron when he said this. Then, he finished off his coffee, and the rest rose with him.

They Apparated at the Burrow, just outside the magical bounds of Moody's Protective Spells. They could hear the raised voices from there.

"But you can't go!" This was clearly Ginny, though very distressed.

Then Tonks: "Hermione, be reasonable. His father was just murdered, he's not at all himself—"

"That doesn't change the fact that in his eyes I'm nothing more than a Squib. A Muggle-born Squib! He doesn't have any use for me anymore."

"Honestly!" This was from Ron's mum. "You're not! And you can't believe that would make a bit of difference to him, even if you were! I never raised any of my children like that!"

"Mrs. Weasley." Hermione's voice was a little calmer, and Ron had to hurry forward to catch what she was saying. "I know he's not like that. But I also know that you can't imagine him living like a Muggle any more than I can. And I don't belong here. Not any longer. I'm useless to all of you. Worthless to the Order..."

"But you can't go!" Ginny insisted again.

"You're Fated!" Tonks reminded.

"I know. Believe me, I know. But it doesn't seem to be enough, does it? He's made it very clear that he wants nothing from me anymore. He doesn't want to Love me. It's no good. I can't stay!"

It was at this point that Hermione came barreling out of the Burrow in a heavy coat, with a shoulder case stuffed full of her things. She stopped short when she saw Ron, and he stopped not three feet from her. Behind her, his mum, Tonks, and Ginny were frozen as they waited to see what would happen. Ron's heart was in his throat. It felt like a stone.

"You're leaving." He said it, and his voice shook. It was impossible to believe. She wasn't leaving the Burrow, or number 12, she was leaving completely. It didn't make any sense. Where would she go? To her parents' to be a Muggle? Ridiculous! She was bluffing. She was just sore about the night before and was trying to get back at him.

"I am," she said, jaw raised.

"Yeah, right. So, you're leaving just because you're pissed at me? How can you do to everyone? Look at Ginny. Look at Harry! Why are you doing this to them?"

"It's for the best," she said.

"Selfish bint. So, you're back to your parents, then? Back to the Muggle world?" He scoffed. He would call her bluff yet.

"Viktor has asked—"

Ron didn't hear another word. Blood rushed to his brain where it set up a pounding rhythm. Viktor. Viktor. Viktor. He should've seen that coming. All thought stopped at that one name, and red-hot fury began to churn in his belly. He couldn't look at her, couldn't stand to be in her presence. "Leave now and don't come back!" he yelled as he passed her. "Good riddance!" He stormed into the house.

"No! No!" he heard his mother cry out. "You can come back anytime, dear. Do you hear me? You always have a home here!"

Ginny ran in after Ron, and pulled his arm to prevent him going up the stairs. "Damn you, Ron! Go after her! Stop her! You can't let her go! This is serious; she's not playing—"

"If she can leave, let her go, I say. If we mean so very little to her—"

"You mean everything to her, you idiot! Don't you see?"

But he didn't see. If he meant everything, then what about Viktor? She was leaving him – leaving all of them – for him. "Let Vicky have her!" And he would, of that Ron had no doubt. He would have every inch of her. Ron yanked his arm from his sister and ran back to the door.

Harry was out there pulling Hermione by the hands, trying to talk her down, but she shook her head. "Please!" Harry said. "Just wait long enough to cool off—"

"You can't just go with him, can you?" Ron called out, clinging to the door jamb. "No, of course not! He wants something! He wants you!"

"Yes!" she shouted at him. "Yes, somebody wants me! And that rankles you, doesn't it? Even though you don't want me, it kills you to know someone else does! But you don't want me, Ron. You should – the Fates demand it – but you don't," she called back. "You've made yourself perfectly clear."

"Fine, then! Go! Marry him and have his babies! I wish you dozens!" His chest heaved; his eyes began to stream hot tears. He could see she was crying, too, and he was glad for it. "Now I know, Harry, how you could throw her out of your house—"

"Let's all take a breath," Lupin began, but his attempt was weak, and their emotions were boiling. Moody pulled out his wand.

Harry turned and shoved Ron back. "She's not betraying you, Ron! Think, mate! Tell her you Love her, that's what she needs to hear! Ask her not to go!"

"Love her? I hate her!" Ron cried, and she recoiled as if he'd hit her. He'd hurt her, and only a very small part of him regretted it. The rest of him relished the knowledge that she felt a little of what was coursing through him. "After everything we've sacrificed for her, after everything we've lost – MY FATHER! If she can leave us, turn her back us – on me – and run to Viktor...shag Viktor–"

"Oh, don't worry, Ron. I intend to," she said, though it was difficult to make out the words over the wind that his risen. She pulled away from Harry, and in the next instant there was a deafening CRACK. She Disapparated.

"She can't do that!" Ron yelled. "She doesn't have a license anymore! She can't!"

"It hardly matters," Harry said, and Ron realized the anger on Harry's face was directed at him. "She's gone!" Moody grabbed his arm before he could lunge at Ron.

"Good! Brilliant!" Ron kept looking back to where she last stood. His brain hadn't yet caught up to what had just happened. The anger in him was starting to cool into fear, and he fought it. The anger was easier, more comforting. "But...but where did she go?"

"Bulgaria!" Ron's mum wailed. She broke down and Tonks and Lupin helped her past Ron and back into the house.

"Bulgaria? She's going all the way to Africa?"

Ginny's wand was out before Ron knew it, and she Bat-Bogey Hexed him. "It's still Europe, you bleeding bugger!"

For days Ron didn't see any of his family or friends. He lived in the room above the shop, just as it was, and worked downstairs when he was able to force himself off the small pallet he'd made from a couple of blankets and a flat pillow. When he slept he dreamed of blood and pain and killing. When he was awake, it felt like a dream.

Lupin came by, but Ron couldn't concentrate on what he said. Something about the Order. It hardly mattered. Harry hated him now.

He'd said he'd never forgive him. Ron knew they all felt that way, though Harry had been the only one to say it to his face. In fact, it had been the last thing Harry had said to him. Ron tried not to care. She was the one to blame, not him. She was the one who left. She was the one who abandoned them when she realized she wasn't going to get her way. She was a selfish trollop! A tart! They were all much better off without her! Ron knew he was. And that's what he told himself over and over as he lay on the floor staring up at the peeling ceiling from between the rows of inventory boxes in his flat at night. He was glad she was with Viktor, because that meant she wasn't there with him. He didn't have to deal with her; didn't have to think about her, not even for a moment.

Every once in a while he would find his hand absently clutching at his chest, looking for the gaping hole that wasn't there any longer. All he ever found was the scar he got in the Cave of Regret trying to rescue her.

How could she still be with him while she was with Viktor? How could she be with Viktor at all? How could she not miss him when he ached with missing her?

Moody was the second to hunt him down. Ron was just about to close the shop when the music announced another customer. Ron began to sweat a little because, if truth be told, Moody made him a little uneasy. He waited for Mad-Eye to make the first move.

"So, abandoned the Order, have ya'?"

"What? Uh – no! Of course not!"

"You've missed a fortnight of lessons."

"Oh. Well...I didn't think I was really wanted."

"You mean by Harry?" Moody asked as if surprised by Ron's response. Then he smiled his unsettling smile and his magic eye zoomed in on Ron. "No, he doesn't see much use in you."

"Well, then," Ron said, somewhat upset to know that Harry didn't miss him either. Of course, Harry would probably stay true to his word and never forgive him – not that there was anything to forgive. Hermione had been the one to leave. She was the one tugging Viktor.

"He needs you, though, doesn't he? Sometimes we need what we don't think we want at the moment." He said this with a point to his tone and a narrowing of his good eye. "How the war ended up in the lap of teenagers is beyond me." He turned abruptly and limped around the shop. "Potter needs you, Weasley, and the Order needs Potter. Not a pretty story, but there it is. You will put aside your trivial hysterics and stand up to the challenge, will you not?"

"Trivial?"

"I daresay you've messed things up but good, and now it's time for you to be the man your father knew you to be and set things right." Moody stopped, appraised Ron with his magic eye, and scowled. "The Fates must be laughing their arses off right about now, knowing they put the key to our success inside you."

"Hey, now! There's no need to be insulting."

Moody lunged for him, and caught Ron by the front of his shirt. He pulled Ron up so high that despite his long legs he was straining across the sales counter. "Listen here, you little pimple! For how you treated that girl I should hex you into tomorrow! So, don't you dare to get all huffy with me. Maggot! Simpering, grotty, wanker! You gormless, sniveling, selfish little toad! Waster! Wart!"

"All right!" Ron shouted and pulled away from him.

"I could go on all night, really," Moody said lightly.

"I dare say," Ron replied, straightening the front of his shirt.

"We all could, believe me. Twit! Shit-for-brains!"

"But I didn't do anything!" Ron insisted. "It's all her—!"

Moody's wand was out and aimed at Ron before he got another word out. "I don't think you want to complete that thought, lad. I really don't."

Ron clamped his mouth shut.

"I'm going to say this now, because I know you're still mourning, and because I know from experience that before this war is out you will become intimate with grief and loss. I don't care that you're young. I don't even care that you're a dim-witted, coddled arse-wipe. You are Fated to that girl. Period. That means in the grand scheme of the world you get off easy. In your whole life, you've only got to do one thing to be a complete man. Only one thing! Be good to a woman. And just one woman! That's it. If you do nothing else at all, you've done what you were set on Earth to do. Love one woman. End of story. And you've fouled that one up but good."

"Now, wait. I've got to be Harry's Smisurato—"

"That's a choice, not Fate!" Moody insisted.

"How do you know?" Ron countered. "How do you know that I'm not equally Fated to Harry as his Smisurato as I am Love Fated to Hermione? You said the Fates put the key to your success in me—"

Mad-Eye's mad eye focused and then refocused on Ron. "Waster! Pimple! Sniveling, grotty, manky wally! Bevel boggie!"

"Oi!" Ron said, and stepped away just in case Moody thought to grab him again.

"It's the key to our success, you little pissant."

"Even so..."

"Everything else you can choose whether or not you want to do it, but with Hermione – she's your True Love! You two were meant to be together!"

"Well, it's not very good of her, then, to be running off with Viktor—"

Moody Ear-flap Hexed him. Ron's ears grew ten times their normal size and began to flutter around his head like a drunken butterfly.

"Perhaps you didn't hear me properly, pimple. Let me rephrase. You drove that girl away. You pushed her, just like you've pushed the rest of us, and given the circumstances it might possibly be understandable if you hadn't pushed so hard and so far, and if she wasn't your True Love! But she is. She's the one person in the world – the only person – whom you must keep close. At all times. Idiot! She's your confidant, and you're hers. She needs you just as much as you need her, but you blew that one out of the water, didn't you, pimple?"

Ron grabbed his dropping earlobes and yanked them down to keep them still. "But she left, not me! Go hex her, why don't you?"

"And why do you suppose that is, I wonder?" Moody asked, leaning in conspiratorially. "That other chap, do you think?"

"Yes!"

"Wrong!"

Ron was hit with a Shiny-pate Hex, and every last hair on his head, including his lashes and brows, simultaneously fell out, rained to the floor. Ron's eyes went wide with horror, and his hands made to catch as much ginger hair as they could. His fanning ears blew it all around.

"Care to venture another guess?" Moody asked, an evil grin on his scarred face. Ron shook his bald head. "Come on, gather your wits about you and let's see if you can't figure this quandary out. Why would Hermione leave her best friends, whom she feels quite passionately about; the Order, which she has sworn to defend even to death; and the entire country, the only home she's ever known?" He circled the tip of his wand over Ron, as if trying to decide what next to hex. It stopped at his crotch. "Come, now, pimple. Think."

Ron's hands cupped his privates. It was a useless attempt to protect them from Moody's wrath, he knew. He shook his head, terrified to say anything more.

"Don't know?" Moody asked. "Are you sure?" The rest of Ron began to shake. "Well, then, I'll give you some time to consider. You're expected at Headquarters at half past seven. You don't want me to come looking for you again." In the next second Moody Apparated away.

"He's mental!" Ron exclaimed, and then collapsed back onto the stool behind the counter. Mad! And then Ron realized that his ears were still enormous and his hair still littered the floor. He tried for the better part of an hour to put himself right, but couldn't, and he began to panic as the evening crept closer and closer to seven. As much as he feared turning up at number 12 and suffering the wrath of the other Order members, or their laughs and snickers thanks to his new look, he was more afraid of what Moody would do if he turned fugitive and went into hiding. And those were the only real options Ron's stunned brain could come up with. Becoming a fugitive, or surrendering to the anger of the Order.

Ron was surprised that his key still worked, that number 12 allowed him to enter, and that he wasn't blasted with hexes when he crossed the threshold into the manse. He was late by a couple of minutes – it had taken him that long to find a hat to cover his new features.

Harry was in the dining room, as was Lupin. No Moody, thank the stars. The furniture hadn't just been pushed aside – the table, chairs, and chests were gone completely, and now the floor and walls were lined with padded mats and pillows. It reminded Ron a lot of the Room of Requirement when they'd used it for the DA meetings.

"And the prodigal son returns," Lupin said by way of greeting. "Brought your wand, I hope."

Ron nodded. He was more concerned with Harry's reaction, which seemed to be limited to standing and flexing his jaw muscles, at least for the moment. "Suppose you want to break my nose," Ron muttered. "Well, have at it."

Harry just rolled his eyes, shook a disapproving head, and moved over a meter or so to allow Ron on the mat.

"Right, then," said Lupin, looking unusually healthy that evening, if not a little nervous. He glanced back and forth between Harry and Ron and seemed to judge whether it might be safe to let them have at it. "Let's take things slow. It's been a while since—"

"Constant vigilance!" Harry shouted in a voice that would've made Moody proud. He raised his wand and pointed it at Ron's chest.

"You want to duel me?" Yeah, that would be a fair fight.

"Easy," said Lupin. He raised a warning hand to Harry. "He's here for you, remember?"

"Right," said Harry. He narrowed his eyes, but didn't lower his wand. "What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing," Ron said defensively. "What's wrong with you?"

"Are you sick or something? Take off your cap."

Ron hesitated. It was the knit cap his mother had made for him a couple of years back, red and gold for Gryffindor colors. Ron looked at the floor as he slid it from his bald head and his ears flopped down to his shoulders. Harry blinked a couple of times before the smirk curled the corner of his mouth.

"I can't fix it," Ron said, miserable. He was certain that if Hermione were there she could.

"Mad-Eye?" Lupin asked.

Ron nodded. "I didn't have the right answers, apparently."

"Yes, he's always been somewhat creative when handing out punishments." Ron couldn't help but hear the appreciation in Lupin's voice, and perhaps a tinge of approval, as well. His ears were too big

not to hear it. With a small flick of his wand and a mumbled word, Lupin righted Ron's ears. They tingled as they shrunk, and grew hot, but, by Ron's touch they were roughly the right size again. "The hair is another story, I'm afraid," Lupin said, not sounding at all apologetic. "But it should grow back good as new."

"Grow back?" How long did it take hair to grow, anyway? It could take weeks. Months! He would be disfigured!

"Enough silliness, gentlemen. Let's see where we stand. Together on the mat, please. Ron, your hands out, if you will." Lupin stood back, his arms folded causally, his wand still lodged in his right hand. "All right, Harry, start slow. Take enough energy for a Patronus, and we'll see what Ron's giving you this evening."

Ron closed his eyes, pursed his lips. He didn't like the way it felt when Harry started poking around inside his well. Harry was still angry, and he wasn't his usual careful self. Ron let him in anyway. No sense in prolonging the agony. He dug down deep and brought the cold up just enough for Harry to get a flavor.

Then Harry let go of his hands, pointed his wand, and yelled, "expecto patronum!" Instantly, a silvery, gossamer mist flooded from his wand, and then formed the shape of...

"What is that?" Ron asked. It wasn't Harry's usual buck.

"Uh...Harry," said Lupin. "That's Ron's magic, yes?"

Harry nodded.

"Ron, quickly now, close your eyes and reach out for all of your magic. Take it all back from Harry."

Ron did as Lupin instructed. It wasn't difficult. His own magic felt surprisingly different from Harry's all of a sudden, and it was easy to separate and then reclaim.

"Right, then," Lupin said. "Harry, cast the Patronus Charm again. This time with just your magic."

Harry did, and his lovely, majestic buck materialized, then stomped the floor with his hoof and snorted. Ron frowned. If Harry's magic was fine, then that meant....

Ron pulled out his wand and cast the spell for himself. His familiar little dog didn't appear as he should have. Instead, the mist formed something smaller, and far fuzzier.

"Is that...is that supposed to be a cat?" Harry asked.

"No," said Ron quickly.

"Looks a little like Crookshanks."

"Not a bit," Ron insisted.

"Yeah, sure!" Harry said, and he pointed at the thing's vaguely head-shaped appendage. "See how his face is all squashed flat?"

"Shut it!" Ron snapped. His Patronus had not changed into Hermione's flea-ridden cat, which she'd left at the Burrow for Ginny to care for. No. It simply hadn't.

"Now, now," Lupin said. He was much calmer than Ron thought the circumstances warranted. "This could be a problem. Ronald, you're not sending anything more than your magic, are you?"

"I'm not sending anything at all," Ron said. "He's taking what he needs. That's how we've always done it."

"Right," said Lupin. "When you're clasping hands—"

"Always," Ron said. Harry nodded as well.

"When you're across the room?" Lupin asked. "Surely not then."

Ron and Harry exchanged glances. Harry pretty much took all the time, and Ron just made the magic available. "The last time I gave him magic," Ron told Lupin, "he nearly caught the manse on fire. It

seems safer this way." Then Ron remembered something. "Except in the Cave of Regret. Remember?" he asked Harry. "After fighting that green thing, you were weak, and I sent you energy to get you mobile again. I didn't dare touch you, as we'd already been linked. Moody had warned us against that."

Remembrance washed over Harry's face and he nodded. "I'm always weaker after we share, aren't I? Is that how it's supposed to work?"

"Huh." For a couple of moments Lupin considered them both. Then, he paced a little. "That's certainly not how it worked with me and James. Or me and Sirius."

"You did this with my father?" Harry asked.

"From time to time," Lupin said wistfully. "It helped sometimes, after a full moon.... It wasn't until we joined the Order that we came to learn how advantageous it could be. It's not a widely held practice, as I'm sure you know. Most people can't handle prolonged energy transfers, and even when they do, you have to have complete trust in the other person in order for the magic to be transferred properly, and without ill-effect to either the lender or the borrower. Which is why, of course, this new turn of events is so very worrisome."

"I still trust Ron," Harry said, with the edge of accusation in his voice. He glared at Ron.

"What? I trust you!" Ron insisted. He was fairly sure they were both lying.

"No, no, that's not what I was suggesting," Lupin quickly corrected. "I'm afraid Ron might be suffering from some of the symptoms Tonks displayed a year ago. He has, after all, suffered a great shock. It's not unheard of for a person's Patronus to change its physical shape. The problem is, of course, that the new Patronus is only a symptom of something much larger happening inside. His magic's been...affected."

"I'm fine," Ron told them both.

"Right! Good man. Let's not get too distressed until we knew what we're dealing with," Lupin suggested brightly. "Shall we try something else? Something, ah, easier, perhaps? No, no, stay there, Ron. Let's try it from there. And this time, why don't you meet Harry half-way? Send a little of your magic out to him – just a little, mind you. Think of how much he usually dips in to, and send him that."

Harry looked at Ron with less anger and more of what was usually between them: camaraderie. Ron relaxed a little, found the cold, and pulled it up some. But this time he also reached out with his magic, not entirely sure what he'd find. It was a strange sensation; or rather, not so much a sensation as an odd bit of knowing. Ron knew Harry's magic when he found it. He couldn't see it, couldn't touch it, couldn't smell it or hear it, but it was there, and he poked it a little with his own. Harry did the same. They were tentative, almost like children shaking hands for the first time. Then Ron pushed a little more, trying to give over his magic to Harry's, but carefully.

The image of Hermione collapsing in Harry's arms streaked through Ron's brain unsolicited. He didn't want to think of it, and he pushed it away only to be replaced with the memory of Hermione and Krum dancing together, smiling and laughing and having a brilliant time at the Yule Ball. Ron closed his eyes, told himself to concentrate. But the new stillness brought with it his father's coffin, and the hole they lowered it into. The frozen flowers on top. Hermione whispering a good-bye.

Harry gasped, and Ron opened his eyes to see him go still as stone. Lupin saw the change in him and stood straighter himself. "Ron? Harry? Everything all right?"

Harry's mouth opened, but nothing came out, and Ron wondered if he was doing something wrong.

"Do I pull back?" he asked.

He remembered Harry standing in the doorway, full of fury having seen him and Hermione kissing. The Harry in front of him now gave a stilted sort of grunt. Ron had to fight the knee-jerk reaction to withdraw his energy. He tried harder to think about nothing, to focus

on the link between him and Harry, and Hermione's back was suddenly there in his head with its gentle dip. "I'm pulling back—"

"Not yet, Ron. Harry?" Lupin asked again. "What are you feeling?"

Harry shook his head. Sweat beaded on his forehead and upper lip. His eyes went wide and began to stream. His face went red, and crumpled. He turned from Ron, and a gut-wrenching scream ripped out of his throat. Ignoring Lupin's order, Ron yanked his magic back home. Harry collapsed. Ron took a couple of steps back, needing air and distance.

Lupin had been right. His magic was tainted.

Lupin knelt over Harry and offered him chocolate. Harry pushed it away. When he looked up at Ron, his eyes were haunted. "You don't even know, do you? That was you, I know it. Just like it was in the Cave."

"What are you on about?" Ron asked, though he knew perfectly well.

"Hate, anger, longing, love, need, want, fear! You love her! I felt it! It's all in there," Harry insisted, pointing to Ron's chest. "What you feel – I felt it all. It's so much...too much. I thought before it was because of the protections on the Cup of Oaths, but it's not. It's you. You pretend you don't feel a thing. But you feel everything! All at once. Magnified a thousand times!"

"Easy, Harry," Lupin cautioned. "Ron, are you intending to send anything through beyond your energy?"

"Of course not," Ron snapped. Why would he want to share his emotions? He didn't even want to deal with them. "And I don't want to love anyone..." He didn't deserve to.

"Focus, gentlemen." Lupin lifted Harry's chin, looked into his eyes, diagnosed him sound, and pushed a wafer of chocolate between his lips. "Harry, what you're feeling isn't abnormal. You're taking in Ron's emotional load on top of your own. Of course you're going to be

overwhelmed. Magic was never intended to be a conduit for anything else."

"I feel Voldemort," Harry said. "I used to see things from him, too, when I dreamed."

"And as I understand Dumbledore tried to squelch that. Magic is a pure thing, Harry, and when it is shared between wizards it must remain as such. Wizards lose themselves too often when they link mind and hearts that way. Besides which, as you well know, the sensation can be quite unpleasant."

Harry turned back to Ron. "You really do think she betrayed you, don't you?"

Ron looked away. "I said as much," he reminded, softly.

Harry shook his head. "I thought you were just being spiteful. I thought you were taunting her because you didn't think she'd go."

"I didn't think she'd go," Ron admitted. "I didn't think she could. So much for being Fated," he said with a humorless chuckle. Then he shook his head as well. "It doesn't matter much, does it? She's gone and we're here. And we've got a war to win."

Lupin's eyes brightened again, and he gave Ron a genuine smile. "That's the spirit!"

"Stop staring," Ron snapped.

Harry did look away then, but Ron knew he was thinking about what had passed between them. Emotions were private things, and he certainly didn't want to share them with another bloke – even if that bloke was his best mate. He hated that Harry knew him too well.

"How do I separate the magic from everything else?" Ron asked Lupin. "How do I keep it pure?"

Lupin considered him for a moment, crossed his arms, and narrowed his eyes. "I suspect your magic is emotionally driven. That would

explain why you've such poor control and no finesse to your spell work of late. In which case, simple concentration won't do you a bit of good. I'll have to speak to Moody – maybe Kingsley – and we'll come up with some exercises you can do on your own."

Ron didn't like the sound of that. "Homework?" And he couldn't copy off Hermione this time. His hand went to his head to run through the hair that wasn't there anymore.

"Let's call it a night," Lupin said. "Start fresh tomorrow."

Harry nodded, so Ron pulled on his cap and yanked it down over his ears. He went back to his flat, to the pallet he'd made for himself on the floor, and tried again not to think about anything, but mostly his dad. He tried all night.

End of chapter 12

End of Part II of False Fates by MD1016

Part III: Os Destinados

Chapter 13 – Finding Empathy

"I felt, for the very first time in my life, that I actually belonged to someone, and someone belonged to me. That I had a home – not a physical place, I mean – but a home in her. I'd always wondered what that might feel like. I had fantasized about it. It was better than I'd ever imagined.

"The moment that she became my True Love, I knew it. She was tangible to me. More than just a feeling, she was like having a new arm or leg...or heart. There was suddenly more to me. She was a very real part of me in that sense, and I Loved her. I can't say it any plainer than that.

"Love with a capital 'L' and love with a lower case 'l' – they're not dissimilar. At least, not for me, they weren't. They're born of the same basic emotions, I reckon, though each is very much their own entity. I think I'd loved someone else – no I'm sure I had – before I ever became Fated. She was a different girl, mind, and me and the other girl, we were younger and so our love was more child-like. More innocent. More sweet and wonderful and exciting. And it was love, I'm certain, because I still love that girl now - though we're older and my love for her has grown into something else, something more; it's evolved into maturity just as I have become a man. It's a love that is stronger for knowing Love, and understanding the difference between the two. Because while they come from the same basic emotion – and I can't stress this enough - there is a difference.

"Love – capital – was a desperate, all-encompassing, manic sort of feeling for me. It was impulsive and overwhelming and I was completely lost to it. To her. I Loved her with everything that I was, with everything I had. And I knew – I absolutely knew – that she felt the same for me. That in itself was a revelation. To know someone Loves you – it's brilliant! It's amazing. It's terrifying and wonderful and...again, overwhelming. There's no subtlety in it, no grace. True Love is almost a compulsion, and when you're in the midst of it, it's the most wonderful thing in the world because in a very real sense it is your world. Well, I should say at least, it was mine.

"With lowercase love I am able to share my life with her. Capital L was my life. The difference may be slight but it's everything when you're drowning in it. She was all-consuming, or maybe, I found her all-consuming, because she was still, well, her. The difference was in me, and I knew – I could see – she wasn't happy. Nothing I did could make her happy, at least not for long. I kissed her and complimented her, and did a hundred little things for her every day. I made love to her, careful always of her pleasure, of her satisfaction, and still she cried. Still she was anxious. Still she had doubts. She hadn't always been mine, you see, and she felt the old pull. It divided her. It was just as real to her as she was to me, and so all the time I tried to help her forget...it was a waste, really. Because I could no sooner have forgotten her at that time than my heart could've forgotten to beat, or my blood to flow. It must've been awful for her. I know it was awful for me.

"When I saw her with our friend, her old pull, I felt as if I had a tempest living inside me. I hated him, and her, even while I Loved her. I told myself it was irrational. I knew it was wrong. I tried to force the jealousy away. I'd no reason to think there was any justification for jealousy, and still, it was there, inside me, just like the Love, though not nearly as welcome. I fought the hatred, but never the Love. That, I embraced as a drowning man might air. I clung to it, and to her, and now I think that might've made matters worse. Because still she cried, and I wanted to force her to stop. I wanted to Love her so much that there would be no room for the sadness left in her. I wanted to be what she was mourning. Who she was mourning. But even Fated, I wasn't him.

"The decision to give her back, to re-Fate her one might say, to her real True Love – her first True Love - it wasn't something I spent a lot of time pondering. Had I, I never would've gone through with it. It was difficult to let her go. But it was more difficult knowing that even though she and I were Fated together we weren't enough. Love wasn't enough. That I was given this opportunity to Love her, and I did as best as I could, and still I wasn't enough. She was the first person I ever completely belonged to, and she wanted another.

"All my life I've been more or less alone in the world. My friends are the one notable exception. They have been my family, my confidants, my support and protectors. And I was watching as one friend became my enemy, and the other began to withdraw, and no matter how hard I grabbed for the two of them, they kept slipping through my fingers.

"Yes, she was ripped from my soul. When I cast the spell, and she got her True Love back – the real one – I felt her go. It was the worst thing I've ever felt – worse than The Cruciatus Curse, worse than even the dementors. I can't say anything else about that.

"Now...I don't know how to explain...I love her still. She's my best friend and I'd do anything for her. I know she feels the same for me. But I'm in love with another girl – the other girl. The first girl. As I've said, the feelings are strikingly similar and still very distinct. There's no confusion between the two. Honestly, I don't think I ever stopped loving the first girl, not really, but the Love was just so very...overwhelming – I'm using that word again, I know. My Love was my world. There wasn't room for any others. It's a terrible, terrible thing to say, but it's the truth. So, while I Loved, my love was pushed aside. A necessary loss I thought at the time. Now, I can't even imagine that thought in my head. It's like I was another me. I never want to be that me again.

"Believe it or not, I'm grateful for the opportunity I had to know Love. It helped me to know mature love, and appreciate it, I think. To appreciate her - the girl I love now - and that, has made it all worthwhile.

"That, and I have my friends back."

-Harry Potter, interview excerpt from *Os Destinados*, by Miguel Amoro

January was a series of grey, cold, rainy days at number 12 in London, and grey, cold, snowy days in Hogsmeade. The weeks seemed to crawl by for Ron, and were filled with repetitive tedium like Ron having to feed himself and wash his clothes, both of which took a bit of organization on his part as his flat still wasn't even close to what any sensible person would call livable. There were days when he

didn't eat, and more than once he just turned his underwear inside out. Ron's mother visited exactly once, and after that took to inviting him back to the Burrow for tea. Tonks was still living with her, and Ron sensed that it was causing some strain in her relationship with Lupin. Not that Ron wanted anything to do with that, but Lupin did become more sullen as the weeks wore on, and more peevish in their nightly lessons.

The lessons themselves were difficult and frustrating, and more often than not Ron felt as if he wasn't learning a thing. He did the exercises assigned – well, he did them when Harry reminded him, and as far as Ron was concerned, he had made very little headway.

Nearly three weeks after his father's funeral, just as Ron was getting up to close the store, a tall, dark, familiar figure blew in with the cold, and the tiny tinkle of music announced his arrival. The Portuguese, in his purple robes and black beard, glanced interested around the shop before his eyes landed on Ron, and a large smile lifted his long, somber face.

"Ah! Mister Weasley," he said by way of greeting, and extended his hand.

Ron shook it, dreading what was surely to come. "Uh...hi, then." Ron muttered.

"Amoro," the man said. "Miguel Amoro. We meet before, at home of you parent. You father, so sorry. Very sorry."

"Yes," said Ron. "Thanks."

"How do you?"

Ron blinked at him. "I'm fine."

"And Menina Granger? She is also fine?"

"Wouldn't know. Look, it's nice seeing you again, but I've got someplace to be-"

"Ah, yes. You British be busy. I understand. But, I have come to ask of you to talk for my book. The story of you is very important for history, and the world! We will write it, yes?"

"Uh...no."

"Yes! You and Harry Potter and Menina Granger, you talk of the Destinados. You teach, I learn, yes?"

"No."

"Yes!" Amoro quickly became excited, and Ron took a coupled of steps back to give him room to gesture with his long arms as he spoke. "The Love, it must be told! Os Destinados – the Fates – they must be understand! Years I wait for Fates to smile, and them smile on you! You and Menina Granger and the Harry Potter! Yes?"

"No."

"Yes!"

"Look, 'the Harry Potter' is famous enough, thank you very much, and Miss Granger doesn't live here anymore, and is very likely a missus by now! And I have absolutely no intention of ever talking publicly again, on any subject!"

His little outburst gave Amoro pause. "I think, not so good a time is this. I wait for the passions to tire."

"Good, wait all you want. But outside. I'm closing up now." Ron showed the Portuguese the door, and tapped his wand to be sure it was truly locked. Through the door's window Ron watched as Amoro conjured a small tent not five feet away, and then an equally small brazier next to it, along with hot coals, with which he began to warm his hands. When he noticed Ron was still watching he waved happily. It looked like Ron was going to have a new neighbor with no immediate plans for moving.

Ron rolled his eyes and doused the lights with his wand. Why could nothing be easy? Why couldn't Amoro just accept Ron's 'no' and leave it at that?

At number 12, Harry was already hard at work deflecting everything Moody threw at him. Several of the dining room walls, as well as the chandelier, took the brunt of it. Ron walked in to see Harry throw himself backwards on to one of the mats, narrowly missing the Severing Curse Moody fire. Harry returned with the strongest "Expelliarmus!" Ron had ever seen. It wasn't until Moody fell back to the ground (his wood foot and false nose flying in opposite directions) that Ron felt a strange wiggle and the now familiar chill within him.

"Perfect timing," Harry said, picking himself up off the floor. He held out a hand to Ron and gripped his arm briefly before helping Moody reassemble. "You're angry again." This comment was directed at Ron, though Harry didn't look at him again.

"You're late," Moody griped from the floor. He glared at Ron while his magical eye rolled up and looked through the ceiling. "You've brought a bag?"

Harry looked up at him as well. "You're staying? Who are you fighting with this time? Or is someone new angry with at you?"

Ron shoved his fists into his jeans. "Well, I was going to ask to kip here. Later. After the lesson. I wouldn't assume, you know, but I figured you'd say yes. The Portuguese is back and he's tenacious, that one is. Wants an interview or something and won't take no for an answer. He's camped outside of the store, and I thought to avoid him for a day or two. Maybe he'll lose interest?"

Harry snorted his views on that. "So, he's back, eh? Why not talk to him? He might have some answers—"

"Well, I haven't any questions, now, have I? The Fates were wrong, weren't they? She's gone and that's that."

Harry shrugged. "It could help get Hermione back—"

"What? Married to Vicky? I don't think so."

Harry turned away under the pretense of returning Moody's wand, and muttered under his breath: "I don't care who she's married to. I just want her back."

"Well, I don't," Ron muttered back.

Harry shot him an angry look. "Don't lie to me, Weasley. I've been in there—" he said, pointing his wand at Ron's chest. "I know better."

Ron scowled at him, but didn't say another word. Harry knew things he shouldn't know. Private things. Things Ron didn't even know. Certainly he didn't want Hermione back! Right? It wasn't as if he missed her...

Well, of course he missed her. She'd been such a fixture in his life for so many years. But it wasn't as simple as just missing her, was it? There was so much more crammed inside him. And it hurt to look too closely. Maybe he did want her back, even married to Viktor – but it wasn't something he wanted to contemplate too hard.

"Constant vigilance!" Moody screamed out of nowhere, and he shot an Itching Hex right between Ron's legs, too fast for any reasonable expectation of deflection. Ron went down swearing, scratching, and hating life a bit more. His only satisfaction was the chill inside him that foretold Moody's downfall. Less than ten seconds later Moody's magical eye rolled toward Ron, its owner having been strung from the ceiling by his left heel. Harry held Moody's wand.

"He's a bit off his game tonight, isn't he?" Ron asked, still scratching.

"I cursed him with a Bad Luck Jinx before we began," Harry explained. Then he flicked his wand, muttered a counterhex at Ron, and the itching mercifully stopped. The relief was brilliant, and Ron flopped on his back on the floor mat.

"You can kip here. Stay as long as you like," Harry told him. "This place is too gloomy with just me in it."

Moody was, of course, cursing and demanding to be released, but it didn't look like Harry was going to pay attention any time soon.

"Yeah," Ron said. "Thanks." The ceiling had several scorch marks in addition to the new footprints Moody was leaving. Ron took a deep breath and crossed his arms behind his bald head. Yes, he missed Hermione, he thought. Alright, he missed her a lot. With his thumb rubbing back and forth against the stubble just breaking through his scalp, Ron looked at Harry, who had dropped down beside him. "She didn't leave because of Viktor, did she?"

Harry rested his elbows on his bent knees. Staring at his trainers, he slowly shook his head.

"She left because of me, didn't she?"

Harry nodded.

"Why didn't I see that before? She wanted me to ask her to stay, didn't she? I could've. I could've and she would be here now. Why didn't I? What's wrong with me?"

With a shrug and a sigh, Harry turned to him. "I've something to tell you, and you're not going to like it."

"Go on, then." Even though Ron wasn't really up to bad news, it was probably best to get it over with. And if Hermione had left Harry with some piece of insight, then Ron felt he probably should know, too.

But it wasn't about Hermione. "I think I may know where a Horcrux is, and I'm taking Shackbolt and Moody tomorrow to retrieve it."

"Where? I'm coming, too."

Harry shook his head. "I can't risk it. Even just now, when you came in the room, your magic was saturated in emotion. I can't afford the distraction."

It was a harsh admission, and it cut deep. Ron hadn't mastered the task put to him, and this was the price. He pursed his lips, angry with himself for his weakness.

Just then Harry grunted and grabbed his forehead, and his spell on Moody faltered. The old wizard went crashing to the floor. "Help him," Harry said through gritted teeth, still obviously fighting the pain in his scar. Ron scrambled up and went to Moody, who pushed him away.

"What is it, Potter?" Moody demanded.

"He's surprised." Eyes still closed, Harry rubbed at his head. The pain was ebbing, then, Ron decided. "He's not often surprised. And he's glad for it."

"Glad for what?" Ron asked.

"Don't know. But it's bigger than he'd hoped for. He's excited." This last bit of information set a frown on Harry's face. "He's getting more powerful. I can sense it in his emotions. It's in his magic. I can feel it."

"Close it off, Potter," Moody warned. "Every time you sense him, assume he's getting something from you. You don't want to tip your hat before we're in a position to strike."

"It's getting harder and harder to sever the connection each time," Harry told them. "It's like he's a lorry or something, and I'm trying to push him back with my bare hands. His magic is that...big."

"I thought you were working on that with Lupin—"

"I am!" Harry snapped, and jumped up from the floor. "It's not that simple, is it? Occlumency has never been easy for me, and this is just getting harder and harder. What's to happen when he finally overpowers me?"

"I suppose that's what I'm for," Ron said.

"Never," Harry insisted. "Not while you're like this. Voldemort would know too much about you. About all of us. We can't give him anything he might be able to turn against us."

Ron had to pull it together. That was the long and short of it. He had to find a way to separate his emotional self from his magical self, and he had to do it quickly. "This never should've been me. I'm not cut out to be a Simsurato."

"You can do it, Ron. I know you can—"

"Constant vigilance!" Moody yelled again, and this time flattened Harry against the far wall. There was a certain amount of glee in his eyes. Harry struggled to even lift his arm and aim, and when he shot a Burning Spell, he missed by meters.

"Voldemort's exhausted him, pimple! He's weak – his well is low! What do you do?"

"Feed him magic," Ron said, and began to reach down for the cold inside himself.

"No!" barked Moody, and his wand left Harry and flew to Ron. A second later Ron was lying on the ceiling, looking down at Harry who slid to the floor. "What do you do?" Moody questioned again. "If you hand him your energy, you're telling Voldemort how to defeat him! What do you do?"

Ron couldn't think with Moody screaming at him, and Harry down there struggling just to get to his knees. Harry shot Moody with Expelliarmus, and it only knocked him back a step.

"Come on, Weasley! You're his Smisurato! He's counting on you!"

"Shut it!" Harry yelled, and blasted Moody with the Furnunculus Jinx, and managed to produce two good-sized boils on Moody's cheek.

Moody rolled his eyes and back-handed his wand at Harry, crushing Harry against the wall again, before catching Ron not an inch from hitting the matted floor. Ron swung back up, slammed bodily against

the ceiling. "Time's a wasting, pimple! What will you do? Voldemort's got him where he wants him. Harry's going to die!"

"Let him go!" Harry called out. "This isn't his fight!"

"He's your Smisurato," Moody reminded him, somewhat angrily. "Your fight is our fight is his fight!"

"Stop, I say!" Harry screamed. "I can't lose him, too!"

This grabbed Moody's attention. With his gaze fixed firmly on Harry, he gently lowered Ron to the mat. "So, now we're getting to the heart of the matter."

"Not here," Harry warned. "Not now."

"Here and now," Moody insisted. "Every man is entitled to his secrets, but not from his Smisurato. And certainly not from his True Love!" This, of course, was spit out for Ron's benefit. "Tell him, Harry, and have it out."

"Tell me what?" Ron asked.

"I don't want to have it out with him," Harry said, angrily. He made it to his feet with the help of the wall, and brushed his hair from his eyes.

"Look, if this is about Hermione—"

"Of course it's about Hermione!" Moody snapped. "What, are you daft?"

"Are you going to hex me again?" Ron's hand went reflexively to his still-bald head.

"No one's hexing anyone," Harry said firmly. "Lesson's over. I'm drained, and we've an early morning tomorrow."

He gave Moody a pointed look, and to Ron's surprised Moody accepted what Harry said. He turned his heavy frame and limped out

of the room with a terse, "Five past five. Vigilance, Potter. Constant vigilance."

Harry relaxed a bit when he was gone, but avoided looking directly at Ron. He pulled off his trainers as he said: "I expect we'll be gone a couple of days, at least. Stay as long as you like."

Ron stopped him before he got to the door. "Um...look. Harry. I know I've messed things up, not just for me but for everyone—"

"Forget it," Harry said, quietly. "I know how you feel now. We're fine – you and me. Just...nip home to your mum, will you? Your dad, Hermione and you...that's a lot of loss all at once."

"Right." Ron watched him go, and then debated whether he should stay at the manse or not. Harry was leaving without him in the morning and, as if that wasn't bad enough, Harry gone meant that Ron would wake up in the manse alone. The idea didn't exactly thrill him. The clock in the entry said it was half past seven. Odd. It seemed much later than that. But, in any event, it was too early to retire, really, and he suspected his mum would just be finishing with the supper dishes, so if he paid her a visit as Harry had suggested (along with a good dose of guilt) then there would probably be tea and cakes. Everyone knew his mum made the best cakes in Ottery St. Catchpole, and quite possibly all of Devon. The grumble in his stomach decided it.

Ron Apparated just outside the magical markers placed around the Burrow. The crystals that lined the path to the house lit a soft amber color as he passed. They knew him and welcomed him home. The house was mostly dark, save for the golden kitchen and den lights. He expected to find his mum at the sink as he pushed open the door, but the kitchen was deserted. A panicked cry came from the den. Ron pulled out his wand and hurried into the next room to find Tonks in a squat on the floor in front of the couch, her hands holding her enormous belly. Pain contorted her face. She was bare legged and sweating, and when she saw him, tears filled her eyes.

"Ron," she gasped. "Thank the stars! I need your help!" She reached out for him, and he hesitated in getting any closer to, what looked like to him, a womanly thing. A scary womanly thing.

"I'll get help," he said, backing away.

"There's no time!" She reached down between her legs. "The baby's already here."

"Wha'? No, it can't – I'll send my patronus –"

"You think I didn't try that already? You think I want to deliver this baby by myself? Mad Eye's bloody charmed the hell out of this place, and I can't get anything through!"

"Where's my mum?" Ron demanded, true panic beginning to set in.

"Went to get her hair done, and that was going on three hours ago! UGH!" She groaned and doubled over and clutched tightly at her stomach. Her face was red with straining, and the veins in her neck and face were prominent enough to terrify Ron. Shouldn't she be in a bed?

"We need help," he began, backing away again.

"You are help, Ron. Please don't leave me! Please!" She started to cry in between bouts of hyperventilation, and Ron looked back at the door. It would take him time to find someone, time to run out, to apparated to St. Adele's – that's where the midwifery witches were, wasn't it? He hardly knew.

"Ron, I need some blankets, some towels..." Another pain slammed through her and she cried out through gritted teeth. The rug on the floor was wet and bloody, but the mess hardly seemed to matter at the moment.

"Maybe I should...find Lupin–"

Tonks shook her head and cried again. "I can't do this, Ron. It hurts so bloody much! What was I thinking? I can't be a mother! I can't!"

Ron's eyes went wide. "It's a little late for that now, don't you think?"

"Shut up!" she yelled, and then dissolved into tears.

"Er...right, then. Blankets and towels."

He bounded up the stairs more to get away from her than to get supplies. Ginny's room was the closest and he ran a hand over the stubble on his head as he looked around. Tonks was having a baby. Downstairs. Right, then. What to do? His mind went blank.

Hermione would know what to do.

"Blankets and towels...blankets and towels. Accio blanket!" The bed flew at him, mattress and all, and knocked him back against the wall. It took him a couple of minutes to dig himself out, all the while cursing himself once again for not having emotional control of his magic yet. Once free, he tucked the blankets under an arm, ignoring the trailing fabric, and rushed back down the stairs, sliding down the last three.

Tonks was straining again. He didn't know what to do with the blankets now that he had them, so he waited. She wasn't cold, that much was clear, not with all that sweat pouring down her neck and face. It seemed to take a very long time.

Finally she reached out for him again, and this time he took her hand and let her pull him close. "The head's out," she said between gulps of air. "When I push next, I want you to see if you can't wiggle his shoulders out."

"Er...what?"

"Here," she said, and yanked his hand down between her legs. He closed his eyes, turned his head, and tried not to touch anything, but she forced his hand on to something wet and slimy.

"Please let that be the baby," he muttered to himself.

"Look at it, Ron! Does he look all right?"

"You've got to be kidding!"

"I can't see him, Ron, you can! I've been at this for hours now, and I need to know if he's all right. Just look. Please! Is he blue?"

"Do you want him to be blue?" Was she hoping for a Metamorphmagus?

"JUST LOOK!"

Never in his wildest nightmares had Ron ever imagined this scenario. Spiders were preferable. "Tonks, I really don't think—"

"You're what I've got, Ron. Just you."

She played to his nobler side and got him. He couldn't walk away from her, not after everything she'd done for him at the Ministry that night, not after all she'd done for his mum - his whole family, really. Tonks needed him, and he was going to help.

"Right, then. So, I just...look?" He could do that. He bent down and forced himself to peer between her legs. "Agh," he said. "That can't be right." Not only was he not prepared to be staring at this particular place on Tonks, he had zero frame of reference. Legs and then a huge, dark, hairy egg-shaped thing right in the middle.

"Is he blue?" she demanded with a bit of hysteria in her voice.

"He's got dark hair," Ron said. "I can't see anything – oh, wait. There's his, well, it could be a face..."

"IS HE BLUE?"

"He's a bit off, that's for sure, but I don't think he's blue. Could use a bit of sun. Hard to tell, really, with all this..." He ran his hand over tiny round cheeks and cleared some of the white, cheesy stuff. "He's got a bit of rubbish up the nose, I think. Shall I...?"

"YES!" Tonks had gone over into another crying fit, and was straining and weeping and shaking all at once. Ron let her be and focused instead on clearing the tiny nose. It was so odd seeing this little person sticking out backward from the bottom of this bigger person that he now knew entirely too well.

The blanket was far too large and awkward to use as a cloth in the confined space between Tonks' legs, so Ron whipped off his shirt and used the edge of it to wipe most of the baby's face clean. He was at an odd angle, and it was difficult to see and maneuver without touching anything else.

"Now, Ron," she gasped. "Pull now!"

There was no handle on the baby, and Ron hadn't a clue where he was supposed to pull from. Certainly he wasn't to go yanking on the baby's head. As she strained the baby inched a little farther out so that Ron could see his neck, and then Tonks gave up, and he got sucked back inside again until his round little cheeks rested snugly on her rear. Another image Ron wasn't thrilled about witnessing, but he realized what the problem was.

"The shoulders are too wide," Ron told her. "He's not coming out this way."

"Well, he's not coming out the other end, Ron, so figure it out! You've got to pull him free!"

"Pull from where?" Ron asked. "He's got a head and a neck that I can get to."

"I don't know!" Tonks wailed. "Get your hands in there and pull him out! Not right now, you half-wit! When I push!"

He glanced back at the door, but there was no sign of reinforcements. With slimy hands Ron pulled out his wand and created a little light. It didn't make the tableau any prettier.

"All right," said Tonks, and she bore down with everything in her.

The baby was pushed out a little, but not nearly enough, and Ron couldn't see any other choice but to actually reach in and try to get his hand between Tonks and the little shoulder. She cried out when he forced his fingers in, and then again when his knuckles wedged inside. One finger managed to loop around the baby's arm, and he tried to wiggle the baby's shoulder up and out. The smell was outrageous.

The opening contracted, and Ron yelled: "Push!" For a moment he thought he might lose his hand in there.

Tonks screamed a deep, belly roar, and the baby moved a little more until his right arm flopped out. Ron then edged him out, and he was free to the waist. A huge gush of water and blood came with him, and Tonks cried out again and braced against the couch. Then she dissolved into tears.

"You're almost there," Ron encouraged. "He's half out now. Just another good shove on your part, and it'll all be over.

She nodded, but he wasn't sure she believed him. He'd never seen anyone so completely exhausted in all his life. "Remind me, Ron, if you would, that when next I see Remus, I need to Pummel him about the head a little."

"You should aim lower," Ron told her, and they shared a weary chuckle.

"Here it is again," Tonks said, and her curled body went tense as she began to strain. Ron didn't even have to look this time, the baby slid out with a pop and more slimy water, and then continued to slip through Ron's hands. He managed a save with the baby against his bare chest, upside down.

"His head," Tonks said quickly. "Support his head. You can't let his neck bend even a little."

It took some delicate doing, but Ron managed to right the baby, and then realized he was still attached. "Uh...Tonks...there's a...what the bloody hell is that? There's not another one in there, is there?"

"It's the cord," she told him, then collapsed back against the couch, and stretched her filth-caked legs out on the floor. "Give him to me." She reached out for her son, and Ron gingerly handed him over. Then, he pulled one of the blankets over her and the baby.

He watched her look at her son for the first time, the way she took him in her arms, the way she touched his tiny toes and ran her finger over his smooth cheek. Her expression was one Ron had never witnessed before, somewhere between awe and love and relief and pride. She cried again.

The baby took his first breath, and it shook his whole body, and then he tensed and let out a high-pitched squeal that Ron was sure made dogs bark three villages over. Then the baby turned red and began to cry in earnest.

"Ron, thank you." Tonks smiled at him with watery eyes. "You saved our lives."

"Me? Nah," he told her with a large smile of his own.

"We're not done yet, though."

Ron's face dropped. "You said there wasn't another one."

"I need you to find some string or something. You need to cut the cord."

"That sounds...dangerous."

She gave a little laugh. "You've done so well, Ron. Just a little bit more."

He got some cooking twine from his mother's drawer in the kitchen, and tied off the small section of the cord near the baby's stomach. Then, as Tonks carefully instructed, he used a Severing Spell to cut the cord. Dark, thick blood oozed out, and for a moment the room went very dark and hot.

"Ron!" he heard her calling from a very long way off. "Ron! Breathe, man! Breathe!"

He ended up on his rear, dizzy and giddy, his wand clutched in one hand and the cord in the other. "Uh, what do I do with this?" he asked once he realized it was still attached to her. Maybe it went back inside for the next baby to use, he reasoned.

"Let's worry about that later, shall we?" She kissed her son.

It was then that the kitchen door opened and Ron's mum came in with a sack full of groceries and a wave in her hair. She stopped dead when she saw Tonks and the baby, and Ron sitting nearby, shirtless and covered in filth.

"Oh, my daisies!" she exclaimed and ran into the room. "Is he all right? Tonks, are you all right?"

"All fine, thanks to your son, here," Tonks told her. Then she stared down at the creature in her arms. "Just look at him, Molly! He's his father's son."

Ron's mum settled herself next to Tonks on the floor and cooed at the new baby. "What's he called?" she asked. "Have you and Remus decided on a name?"

Tonks gazed at her new son. "Remus had thought to call him Sirius or James, after his lost friends, but he came to agree that there was too much pain and history there for this new little life. We've agreed to call him Jack. Jack Ronald Lupin, I've just decided." She reached out and squeezed his shoulder. "You're my hero, Ron. You took control and did what had to be done, and...thank you..." She burst into tears once more, bouncing little Jack on her chest as she sobbed.

"There, there," said Ron's mum. "Give me the baby and I'll get him cleaned up and swaddled. Delivered the afterbirth, have you?"

Tonks shook her head as she handed her baby over.

"Well, then, we'll see to that as well. Ron, dear, why not get cleaned up, and then run see if you can't find Remus. We should introduce him to his son before young Jack here leaves for Hogwarts."

"Right," said Ron, suddenly exhausted. Birthing babies was hard work. Then he stopped and looked at Tonks. She was all right with him leaving, wasn't she? Now that his mum was back? She smiled at him through her tears, and then at her wailing baby, and Ron felt confident she didn't need him there anymore. And when his mum handed the baby back to Tonks, she began to lift her shirt to expose a knocker.

Ron ran from the room.

Lupin was at their apartment, and all Ron had to say was, "The baby—" and he Apparated away leaving Ron to lock up.

Ron completely forgot about Amoro, though. When he returned to his flat the old man was standing out in the cold, misty night. Ron turned, thought to go back to the manse — even with Harry gone - but something made him look back at the tall wizard hunch against the freezing rain. He knew Amoro was playing on his sympathies — no wizard in his right mind would just stand in this kind of weather, especially with a tent not a foot away. A wizard's tent that probably came complete with heat and running water. And a four-poster bed.

And still Ron hesitated. Because when he looked back at the Portuguese, there was real hope in his eyes. The man knew about the Fates. Ron didn't find this quite so threatening as he had before, for some reason. Tired as he was, Ron thought he might be up for anything that night.

"All right," Ron said with a roll of his eyes. "Come in. I'll give you an hour."

"Thank you, thank you, jovem Weasley! The world thank you!"

"Yeah, yeah," Ron said. "They better."

It was five days before Ron saw Harry again, and then it was as Kingsley was carrying him up the manse stairs. Kingsley's rhino

Patronus had found Ron at the shop, and told Ron that he was to run back to the Burrow and collect his mother as Harry was going to need some tending. Nothing St. Mungo's worthy, he was assured. Ron had arrived at number 12 with his mother in tow just moments before Moody and Kingsley hurried in. Moody headed for the parlor and the Firewhiskey there, while Kingsley took Harry up to his room. Ron's mum followed up. Ron went in behind Moody.

"Drink?" Moody asked.

"No, thanks."

"Well, I don't mind if I have a glass. Or three."

"Did you get it?" Ron couldn't wait any longer. He had to know if they'd managed what they set out to do: find and destroy a Horcrux.

"Oh, yes, I daresay we did. Brought the whole of the Cave of Regret down around us as well. The Ministry will have a fit when they find it collapsed. A favorite hiding place, it was."

"The Cave?" Instantly Ron remembered the rough walls, cool air, and Hermione lying on her side on the rock floor, quietly crying. It had been a horrible place. "It was there? How did you find it?"

"No idea," Moody admitted, and then collapsed down into a chintz chair. "Potter knew the place from before, and said something about a fork in the cavern, and the path less traveled, or some such. Close as I can figure that Malfoy mongrel was sent there to retrieve the Horcrux for You-Know-Who, stumbled on the Cup of Oaths, and decided the Cup was worth more to him than the Horcrux, and changed his plans."

"You-know-who sent him to get the Horcrux? That can't be right."

"Oh, we think it is. Ever since the first two Horcruxes were vanquished, You-Know-Who has been desperate to get the rest of them back. Can't have little pieces of his soul just laying around where any Tom, Dick, or Harry...can find them and destroy them, now can he? I mean, in peace-time it might make sense to spread

them around a bit, in case of accidents or what not. But now that he knows we're hunting them down...oh, that's lovely," he said, having tasted his drink.

"What was it?"

"The Horcrux? A cup. Little silver thing, not even big enough for a decent cup of tea. Belonged to Helga Hufflepuff, though it would, wouldn't it? She was overly fond of useless trinkets and dainty rubbish."

Ron was surprised to hear this coming from Moody's mouth, and his expression must've shown as much. "What?" Moody demanded. "I've read a history or two. I did go to school, you know. I've not always been an old fart!"

"So," Ron said, changing the subject, "that makes three down, yes? Three more to go?"

"That's what it seems," Moody agreed and took another swallow.

"And Harry's going to be all right?" Ron asked, nervously looking back up the stairs. He'd seemed awfully pale, or had that just been the dim light?

"That one fought like a wizard!" Moody said, jabbing a blunt finger in the direction of the stair. "Be proud of him, pimple. He was a sight to behold."

"Maybe I'll just go up and—"

"No!" Moody insisted. "You stay away from that one until he has a chance to recover some of his energy. It's dangerous for him to be so weak; he's vulnerable in this state. He needs to regain his strength as quickly as possible, and that won't happen if you accidentally douse him with your latest woes."

"I was just going to say hullo," Ron said defensively.

"Wait until tomorrow, I say! He deserves to sleep, in any case."

"Yeah, all right." It hadn't looked like Harry was all that talkative as Shackbolt was carrying him up the stairs. "Tonks had her baby. He's called Jack."

"Has she now? I trust all went well."

"As well as could be expected. I delivered him."

Moody snorted his amusement, and then sobered when Ron's earnest expression didn't change. "You're joking," Moody said.

"Not a bit of it," Ron told him.

"Well, well. Pimple rises to the challenge. I take it you were the only git around at the time?"

Moody's compliments sounded suspiciously like insults. Ron's brows furrowed. "I did what needed to be done. And everyone is safe and healthy - that's all that matters."

Moody took a moment to absorb Ron's assertion, and in that moment took another sip. "Good man. There may be some hope for you yet. Now get out, and let me think in peace."

Ron left then, but more because he didn't want to sit around while Moody became even more irritable with drink.

He headed back to the Burrow, which he temporarily called home again. Tonks had gone home after Jack's arrival, to Lupin's great relief, leaving Ron's mum in an empty house. It had only taken her a night alone in the house before she visited him at the store, and much to Ron's surprise, seemed reluctant to leave again. He took her to a restaurant that night, and she praised him for treating his "ol' mum" like a queen. Neither of them spoke of Hermione or his father, though Ron was fairly sure they were weighing heavily on both of their minds. The conversation did turn, however, to Ron's flat and his plans to make it a home. This pleased her less, somehow, and he was confused by her reactions until she suggested that he go back to the Burrow "...just until," she said, "your flat is livable. It can't possibly feel like a home in there now with all those boxes and what-nots."

She wasn't ready to be alone, he realized, and then decided that maybe he wasn't quite ready, either. And there was, after all, a bit of work to be done on the flat. And as long as it was just temporary, Ron assured himself, there was really no reason not to give his mum another body in the house. And if he was to be honest, the flat, livable or not, was rather lonely. He was glad to have the shop to fill his days, but the evenings were tough. Back at the Burrow, they weren't so obviously painful.

It was two days later that Ron finally caught up with Harry, still in bed, but happily munching on toast and marmalade and lemon tea. Ron's mum left them alone to talk, and Ron found he didn't know what to say. Harry looked like death warmed over. He was so pale as to be chalky white, and it made his black hair and brows seem that much blacker. His scar seemed redder than usual, his eyes bruised.

"You look like hell," Ron finally said, and this brought a grin to Harry's face. "You should be at St. Mungo's. I wish I could've gone with you."

"Thanks," Harry said. "But had you gone, I think you would be singing a different tune. It wasn't as pleasant as the last time you and I visited that cave."

"Harry!" Ginny came bursting in, and she threw herself at him on the bed. "I've only just got your owl! How could you not tell me what you were doing?" Her arms went around his neck and she pushed her face into the crook of his neck. "Damn you, Harry Potter! You tell me to trust you and then you go off and do something like this!"

"But I'm fine!"

"Like hell, you're fine!" She pulled back far enough to get a good look at him. "Mum says you've been in bed for days, that you're weak as a kitten!"

"She exaggerates. I'm really all right."

"Then why's your scar look like you've tried to scratch it off?"

Harry rolled his eyes and looked to Ron for help, but Ron wanted to know as much as Ginny did. Harry sighed and played a little with his toast. "Well, we destroyed a Horcrux, and Voldemort is understandably a little peeved. He's been killing...punishing. It makes him happy. Well, not happy, but it excites him. And when he's happy and excited I hear about it." He rubbed at his scar. "It's been difficult to sleep, actually. On the other hand, they're down four Death Eaters, so there's the silver lining."

Ron ignored Harry's arm snaking around his sister's waist. Instead he focused on something less disturbing. "Why aren't you at Hogwarts?" Ron asked Ginny. "They don't allow passes home unless it's an emergency."

"I'm on a Family Mourning Pass. I told them mum was in a bad sort. Which, she sort of is. She's downstairs crying."

"She still does that a lot," Ron said quietly. "Tonks said it's normal, but I don't know."

"I miss dad, too," Ginny whispered. "Oh, Harry, please, please take care. And tell me when you're going to run off. You promised you'd tell me and I believed you, and if you want me to trust, then you have to be honest!"

"I'm glad to see you, too," he said to the top of her head. "I've missed you."

She squeezed him a little tighter.

Ron was torn between wanting to make a hasty exit, and leaving his baby sister in Harry's bed un-chaperoned. He knew where that had already led, and felt some vague brotherly duty to see that it didn't happen again. At least not on his watch. But neither of them seemed to mind that he was there...or notice, really.

"You were right about the Shield Charm," she told him, a gentle smile on her face. "It worked, well, like a charm. I got the highest marks in the class on my DADA exam this week. Professor Cothwaith was

most impressed, and asked me where I learned such...finesse. Thank you, Harry, for my private lessons." She kissed him on the cheek, and a silly grin spread wide across his face. He looked at Ron, a little abashed, and happily shrugged.

The two of them there, relaxed against each other, happy to have their arms entwined, didn't look like the teenagers Ron knew so well. They looked every part of a couple, and it was queer for Ron to see his little sister that way, let alone his best mate. They seemed comfortable, he decided, with each other and their situation. Harry kissed the top of her head like it was the most natural thing in the world. It left Ron unsettled.

"So...this is real," Ron said, waving a hand at the two of them. "It isn't going to go away?"

Ginny and Harry exchanged looks, and then she kissed him lightly on the lips, bounced off the bed, and headed out. "I'm going to check on Mum. You boys chat."

Harry watched her go, and then sobered a little when he looked at Ron. "I've been expecting this," Harry told him. "I'm surprised it took you this long to ask my intentions toward her."

Ron eyes narrowed. He didn't think that was what he was asking. "None of my business, really."

"She's your sister, and I'm your best mate. What happens or doesn't between us will certainly affect you in some way."

"It just feels so..." He wanted to say wrong, but that wasn't really true. Ron struggled for a moment, but couldn't find the right word.

This made Harry smile. "It was bound to happen, sooner or later."

Ron nodded, miserable. "You're not going to break up with her again, are you? Because I know what you two have been doing—"

"Did," Harry said quietly, now studying the toast on his discarded plate. "Just the once. That was sort of...an accident. We just got a little carried away—"

"Really," Ron said quickly, "I don't need to know. I was just making sure that, well, you understand she's very taken with you, of course. Hermione said something about love." This made Harry grin again, as well as blush a little. "And she's, well, she's my sister. It would be awful if you changed your mind again and decide that it's too dangerous for you and her to date again."

Harry nodded. "I think your father's death proved that anyone associated with me is a potential target, regardless of whether we're dating or not. Ginny's life is in danger, and has been since I first met your family. It's hard to accept, but it's true. Not dating her isn't going to change that. And dating me," Harry said happily, "means she's not in danger of bringing Terry Boot into the mix. So, you see, I'm really just thinking of Terry."

Ron rolled his eyes, and gave a guffaw. "Right. That little display there," Ron waved to the bed, "was for Terry Boot's benefit. You're too selfless."

Harry chuckled. "Not at all. Ginny's...quite a girl."

"Yeah." Ron ran a hand over the soft fuzz on his head, a nervous gesture he'd developed over the last couple of weeks. He leaned forward in the chair, rested his elbows on his knees. "Harry...what have I done? I miss her so." He swallowed. A heaviness settled in his chest.

It was a relief when Harry said, "I miss her, too," and didn't ask Ron to elaborate.

"Do you think...they're married yet?" Ron asked. The thought had been playing through his head for the last couple of days and nights, almost non-stop. He thought it might make it less painful to just get it out there, but now that he'd heard the question aloud it almost made it worse.

"Dunno," Harry said. There was no blame in his tone, no accusation or reprisal. Harry's grief was much more straight forward. He treated Hermione's loss like a death. Hermione, Ron's dad – Moody had said there would be more grief before the war was over. People died in wars, and people were left behind. Ron wondered who else he would lose – or who might mourn him. Certainly Hermione would notice if left with a gaping hole in the middle of her soul. He touched his chest. Even married to Viktor; he never wanted her to know that pain.

"Your Mum told me about the Portuguese," Harry said, changing the subject entirely. "About how you've been giving him interviews. She said you've learned a lot about your Fates from him. That's good."

Ron nodded, realizing it wasn't such a complete change in topic after all.

Harry continued. "I thought I might speak to him, as well. Try to understand the whole prophecy thing better. Did you know there are only prophecies about Fated things? But that not all things Fated are spoken of in prophecy? No, neither did I. I was surprised, actually, because of all of the hundreds of prophecies we saw in the Hall of Mysteries a couple of years ago. It made me think that being Fated wasn't all that rare – and then I thought of all the wizards in the world, past and present, and then, well, I guess there weren't all that many prophecies in there, after all."

"Amoro thinks you may be Fated multiple times."

Harry smirked. "Not Love Fated, surely."

"No." Ron glanced at the table where Harry's wand lay in front of a picture of his parents holding him and waving. "He thinks your mum was the first ever Muggle-born to be Fated. He thinks she was Fated with you."

"Really?" Harry's eyes widened.

"Hermione's the second. And she's Fated with me," he said, miserable.

Harry remained silent at this revelation, and studied Ron instead. Ron looked away, under the scrutiny. He couldn't tell what was going through Harry's head, and he didn't want Harry in his.

Of course, half the time Ron didn't know what was going through his own head. Just now he'd thought about that supper of fish and chips he had shared with Hermione and Harry that night when Harry first asked them to move in to the manse. He'd been thinking more about the chips than anything else, but the image of both of his friends was there as well. There was no reason for the memory; no impetus. It was just Ron's brain, knowing it had been hours since he'd eaten anything, weeks since he'd a proper meal, looking for a bit of fish and chips and comfort. He could just as easily have thought about any number of end-of-year feasts at Hogwarts. Couldn't he?

Harry handed him the last piece of toast from his plate. "You've been staring at it," he quipped. "Eat it."

This brought Ron out of his reverie, and he shook his head and stood. "I should go. I've got to open the store, and all."

"Will you be back for lessons tonight?"

"All right, then."

When he left the room he completely forgot he was hungry. That night Lupin worked with Ron privately in the kitchen with the table and chairs pushed out of the way. It was slow going, but Lupin was more than patient. He looked exhausted, ragged, even though it was three weeks before the next full moon. "Jack," he'd said by way of explanation, along with a weary but heart-felt smile.

About an hour into the evening a crash followed by yelling came from upstairs, and Ron followed Lupin up the stairs two at a time to find Harry clutching his head, doubled over on his knees on the floor. Moody was kneeling beside him, but seemingly at a loss as to how to help. It was Harry's scar - that much was clear. His throat and face were bright red, the veins on his neck about to pop. Harry cried out until his voice broke, and his eyes streamed. He curled in on himself

and slammed his forehead on the wood floor. Moody was able to stop him before he did it again.

"We need to find him an Occlumens," Lupin said. Moody nodded in agreement, a grim look on his face. "This is the worst I've ever seen him." Both men looked to Ron, and he concurred. Harry was in agony.

"He's reaching out for me," Ron said, and then corrected: "for my energy." The instant Ron let him in, his head was cleaved in two. Ron grabbed both sides, more out of reflex than any real hope of keeping his brains inside, and then blacked out completely.

When he came to, Harry was propped up against Moody's bent knee, gasping, sweating, and spitting the last of his supper into the pool of vomit next to him. He looked as if he'd just been beaten.

"There you are," Lupin warmly said to Ron. "Eat this." He handed him a chunk of chocolate from his pocket. It was warm and melted, and it practically slid down Ron's throat. "Better now, are you?"

"What the bloody hell was that?" Ron's hands told him his head was intact, if still bald. "I thought I was dead."

"Sorry," Harry said with a shake of his head. "I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't mean to hurt you—"

"Is that what it feels like?" Ron demanded. "Was that V-voldemort?"

Harry nodded, and then cradled his forehead in his hand again. "He's happy. Couldn't you tell? Behind the pain?"

"Behind the...there was something other than pain?" And pain didn't even seem the right word for what he felt. Four letters couldn't possibly contain the level of absolute agony that had sliced through his skull.

"It felt like he was...frolicking. Now that's a sight I wish I'd seen." He gave a weak chuckle. "I can't imagine what's happened that would make him so happy. You think he's found us? Found me?"

Moody's eye immediately scanned the manse. "Couldn't have. But best to be sure." He pulled his wand out, disappeared the sick Harry had produced, then laid Harry down on his side on the floor, and left.

Ron recovered faster than Harry, though he was still shaky on the inside. He pulled away from Lupin and went to sit by his friend, again careful not to touch him. Lupin seemed lost in thought.

"Ron," Harry whispered, "what time is it?"

"Can't be more than eight – oi! It's near on midnight!" Ron said staring at the clock on the mantel. "Were we out for hours!" He put a hand back to his head just for a little reassurance that it was still there. "Do you suppose it goes the other way as well? That he feels pain when you're happy? 'Cause if so, that night with you and Ginny on the couch must've been torture for him."

Harry laughed at this, then coughed. "I can only hope."

"Enough, you two. To bed with the both of you. And remember to keep your distance from each other, at least until morning. I need to find Kingsley. Can I leave you? Are you well enough?" He looked both of them in the eyes, judging their state of health.

"I'm fine," Harry said. "I'll just sleep." He looked at Ron.

"What? I'm better than you are!"

"Then upstairs and to sleep. Ron, I want you under this roof tonight, at least until Alastor gets back and gives us the all clear." This reminded him of something. "I'll check on the Burrow as well, just to be sure." He turned, then, and left, without a good-bye.

Ron was climbing the stairs just behind Harry when the second attack came. Harry screamed and went down, clutching his head, and slid halfway to the bottom of the staircase. Ron managed to jump out of his way, still afraid to touch him. At a loss as to what to do, Ron felt a panic sweep through him as he watched his friend once again writhing in You-Know-Whose clutches.

In agony, Harry slammed his head on the stair, and blood shot out from his nose. Ron ran into the parlor, grabbed one of the pillows from the settee and managed to slide it between Harry's face and the tread by the fourth or fifth blow. Blood covered the every surface in a four foot radius, soaked Harry's clothes, splattered on Ron. He worried Harry had done some real damage. But then Harry's cries seemed to calm a little, and his body became less taunt. The pain receded, and Ron pulled out his wand and righted as much of Harry's face as he could. His nose still looked broken, though, and he was fairly sure Harry was going to need a real healer this time, not just a quick spell. The question was: did he take Harry to St. Mungo's? Or did he wait for Moody to return? Harry made that decision for him.

"Ron, something's gone wrong. Horribly wrong. For Voldemort."

"That's good for us, right, mate?"

Harry grinned at him through the blood, the swollen eye and cheek, and puffy, crooked nose. "Wicked good." He turned his head and spit out a tooth. "Maybe though, we could put off the celebrations until we get back from hospital?"

It was close to a week later, while Ron had closed the shop for lunch, when Harry's gossamer buck galloped through the front wall. He carried a four word message:

"St. Mungo's. It's Hermione."

End of chapter 13

Chapter 14 – Growing Pains In The Cupboard

"At a very early age I found that books contained within them all the answers to every question my brain could think up – and a million, million that I'd never dreamed. Books were the key to understanding the Muggle world, a place that I knew even as a very young child was foreign to me. And, books held secret truths about the magical world that I was thrust so abruptly into, a world full of brilliant possibilities and endless wonder to my eleven year-old self. Books were a lifeline to my past and my future; they married the two into a place that I finally belonged.

"Garrett's Almanac of All Things Ethereal says that 'love is an intangible that is known when felt, and cannot be quantified.' That's a direct quote. It goes on for thirty more chapters about how wonderful love is, how satisfying, how beautiful, and describes it as the most brilliant feeling in the world, and that a person comes truly alive when they feel love for the first time. Love is all a person needs in the world, Garrett tells us. Love can conquer all.

"I have absolutely no recollection of either 'coming alive,' or 'feeling love' for the first time.

"I think the first time I realized I liked Ron more than anyone else was the end of the summer before second year, when my parents and I happened to run into the Weasleys in Diagon Alley while school shopping. The moment I laid eyes on him I thought my heart would burst. I didn't cover it well, I don't think. I remember my mother giving me a concerned, curious smile that made me blush. I was shocked about how much I had missed him, which was unusual for me. I was a practical child. Never prone to emotional frivolities. I never really had many friends.

"Ron and I ate ice creams outside in the shade that afternoon and talked about nothing in particular until Harry happened on us. And I was happy to see Harry, too. Thrilled, really. And still not quite as much as I had been with Ron. It was...disconcerting...odd, really, because Ron wouldn't have been someone I would have pick for myself. He was silly and lazy and smelly. And he didn't like to read. I thought for certain that I was just imagining something that wasn't

really there, but a month or so later Dra - another student at Hogwarts - called me...a horrible name. And Ron, without giving it a moment's thought tried to hex him. Of course, his wand was broken, and the hex backfired, and he vomited giant slugs for the rest of the night. And all the while I kept thinking: he's my idiot hero.

"And while I liked Ron above all others, even Harry (who didn't smell in the least), it was never love. The love came later. Sometime after I met Viktor and before we started fifth year. Or maybe after that, as well. As I said, there wasn't a moment where I was suddenly more alive than I was the moment before. My loving Ron has always been a process. A painful, tedious, laborious process. I think maybe it always will be.

"Of course, we were Fated all through this time and never knew it. One might think that to Love someone might help to love them as well. But I can tell you of many times when I didn't even like him. Ron can be cruel when he wants to be. Well, that's not very fair of me. He can be cruel when he doesn't even know it, as well.

"Harry can't. That's one of the many, many differences between them. And one of the reasons I tried to convince myself that Harry was the one I really wanted. I had to let that particular fantasy go, though, when I saw Harry and Ginny together and felt nothing but excitement and happiness for my two friends; and then, turned around and saw Ron trying to swallow Lavender Brown's face whole in a fit of snogging, and wanted to kill them both. And then die myself. You must understand that for a girl who prided herself on being sensible, that particular bit of emotional devastation was quite distressing. Yes, I'd been jealous before – I am a girl, after all – but this was different. This was the green-eyed monster within finding her voice, her claws, her rage, and she hurt. I hurt.

"In the end I had to accept it; the facts were too cut and dry. I loved Ron and not Harry. I should've loved Harry. Harry was the sensible choice.

"So, when I began having strong compulsions toward Harry last autumn, I thought at first I was finally coming to my senses. That lasted all of a day, when I then realized to my complete misery that I

still had feelings for Ron. And strong feelings, too. And he seemed to finally recognize that he felt something for me. Finally. And while he was being very Ron in his backward way of doing things, he was also very sweet and very sad and it just tore me in two because I couldn't seem to fight the new romantic impulses toward Harry, and more importantly I didn't want to. But when Ron kissed me...I thought I was going to die, it felt so very right. I went mental. That was the only explanation I could come up with. I'd lost my mind. All the books said it wasn't possible to love two people at once, and yet I was absolutely certain that I did.

"When I lost Harry – or rather, when Harry became my best friend again – I thought things might go back to normal, both between Harry and me, and between Ron and myself. I was very wrong. My friendship with Harry was strengthened a hundred fold for having Loved him. We were better than ever. I could talk to him, trust him, more than ever before. I'm certain he felt the same. And all the while everything I had with Ron turned to rubbish. I Loved him again, and loved him, and none of that mattered. Love is not enough. When he doesn't want to love you back. I worry that, perhaps, for Ron and me it never will be enough.

"And still, I Love him. I can't not; the Fates have made certain of that. They've cursed us together. And I love him, too, though I find it very hard to love Ron. It's difficult to love a man that cannot be trusted not to break your heart.

"I do wish I had finished my last year at Hogwarts. Instead of Transfiguration and Runes and Potions, in the past year I've learned that books lie: love can hurt.

"And if books can lie, then what can I trust?"

-Hermione Granger, interview excerpt from *Os Destinados*, by Miguel Amoro

From the moment Ron heard Harry's patronus until he was standing outside her hospital room door, Ron didn't think or breathe. He was shaking when Harry stopped him with both his hands clutching Ron's shoulders. Harry looked him hard in the eye.

"Hermione..." Ron said. It was half a whisper, half a sob; a plea and a prayer all at once.

"She's here," Harry said. "She's alive."

This was meant as reassurance, but it wasn't much. "Alive?" Ron asked. "There was a question?"

"She's been hurt. There was a fight – Death Eaters found her. Viktor is dead."

"Dead?"

"Ron, listen to me. Look at me." He forced Ron to meet his eyes. "The healers feel she'll make it, most likely, but she's been badly hurt. She could barely walk when she made it to the manse...could barely talk. She doesn't look the same—"

"I don't care what she looks like!" Ron shouted at him. "Let me go!"

"Easy." This came from Lupin somewhere behind him, and a light hand was pressed against his back. "You need to be prepared, Ron."

"I need to see her." Ron said this with as much controlled and calm as he could manage, and still his voice shook. "Get out of my way."

Harry did step aside, and Ron opened the door. The room was dim and warm, and a slight figure lay on a white, linen-covered bed. Dark blankets pulled up to her chest. Her head lay turned to one side. She slept.

Ron had to take a few steps to see her properly, and still, he couldn't believe it was Hermione. All her beautiful fluffy brown hair was gone; cut away. Her ear and half of her cheek and neck were slimed with some sort of salve - a terrible black and red burn underneath. She was as white as the sheets she lay on, and thinner than Ron had every known her to be. Her eyes were sunk back into her skull, and lined with dark circles. She looked so completely foreign from the girl he'd known for so long. But it was her, he realized, because he

recognized the cut through her left eye brow and over her lid, now a raised scar, as the one she'd gotten at Malfoy's hands in the Cave.

There were other cuts and bruises as well, but it was the burns that tickled in the inside of his belly, and made his knees feel as if they might fail. Ron sank into the cold, hard chair by her bed and took a deep breath.

"You can touch her, pimple," said a voice from the corner. He was in the shadows, but Ron knew Moody's voice. It was good that he was there, Ron thought. Someone to protect her, to watch over her.

Her hand was bandaged and blood has seeped through the first couple of layers. Her fingers poked out the end - each small and thin. Dark, narrow lines of dirt still lay under her jagged fingernails. He reached out and brushed his fingertip across hers, half certain she would evaporate or he would wake up. Part of him wanted to wake up, to know she was whole, even if with Viktor.

"She's cold," he said, to no one in particular. He looked around but there weren't any other blankets. In fact, it was just the bed, and the two chairs in the small room; no windows, and only the one door. "She needs another blanket."

Moody pulled out his wand and conjured one up. He handed it to Ron and then put a Warming Charm on it. Carefully, not wanting to wake her – not even knowing if he could – Ron covered her up to her chin. He was close to her then, and he couldn't help but run his hand ever-so lightly over what was left of her hair. It had been hacked off, with scissors most likely, and in great bunches.

"Oh, Hermione. What have you done?"

"That's how she got out of Eastern Europe," Moody told him. "Disguise and deception, and a good, honest dose of luck." Moody then pointed to her throat, and Ron saw she was still wearing the charm he'd given her. It was black now, and it looked disfigured, as if it had melted a little around the edges. "She said it saved her life."

"She did?"

"Well," said Moody with a shrug. "I assume that's what she was on about. The poor chit was babbling mostly nonsense by the time I made it to Headquarters. Was adamant that she didn't want to see you, though. That surprise you, pimple?"

"Uh...no, I suppose not." It did, however, make him miserable all over again.

She moaned a little, stirred in her sleep, and Ron held his breath. She pushed at the blanket covering her arms, and then gave a little high-pitched groan of frustration as she kicked against the covers tucked around her legs. Something must've hurt, because she yelped, and that woke her. For a moment she lay perfectly still, just catching her breath and blinking. Her head lolled to one side and she saw Moody. He wiggled his fingers at her, and she half-heartedly returned the gesture.

Then, she turned her head the other way and closed her eyes. When she opened them again, she was staring at Ron. She didn't react, and neither did he. It felt like his heart stopped in his chest, when her eyes locked on to his. A lump formed in his throat. Ron knew the second she registered who she was looking at, though, because her eyes went wide, and she screamed. Not a normal girly scream, mind you, but a gut-wrenching, soul-clenching scream. Harry, Lupin, and half a dozen others were through the door before she stopped.

She curled away from him, cowered, just as she'd done when Draco's chair appeared next to hers during the hearing. It twisted his heart.

"Hermione..." Ron said, but this only seemed to upset her more.

Harry pushed in front of Ron and tried to comfort her. He leaned over her bed, and whispered reassurances to her.

Lupin tried to pull Ron back and out of the room.

"I can't leave her," Ron told him, meeting his eyes. "Not now. Not like this."

"You're not doing her any good," Lupin said. "She's not ready for you."

"No," Ron agreed. "And I suppose I'm not quite ready for her, either, but I won't leave her. I can't. Don't you see? If I leave her now that's it for us?"

"Ron," Lupin said, leaning close to him and placing a fatherly hand on his shoulder. "It will never be over between the two of you." And of course, he was right.

Hermione was still crying, though fatigue was creeping in. She wasn't well, that was plain, and everything in Ron ached for her. He touched Harry's shoulder, and then gently pushed his mate out of the way. He knelt so that his face was close to hers, and slowly he pulled her chin toward him. She blinked tearfully at him. Her eyes were dark and wide and frightened, and Ron thought she looked like a caged animal.

"Hey," he whispered to her. "Missed you."

She blinked and a tear tracked across the bridge of her nose and into the other eye. She sniffled. He gave her a small smile, a little bit of encouragement. He'd never known Hermione to be wary before. She looked away, and her brows rose together as if to cry some more, but she closed her eyes on the emotion, and Ron watched as she let out a long sigh that hitched at the end.

"I didn't want to come back," she whispered to him, only him. "But I had no way to protect myself...and I couldn't allow them to capture me...because of what I know...about the Order and Harry. And I was too afraid to jump, and I couldn't protect myself...my parents are Muggles, they'd be easy targets...and I can't get anyone else killed. I just can't..." Tears flowed freely, her eyes still closed. "I didn't want to come back...I tried not to...but I've no where else...I have no place..."

"You came home," Ron whispered back. "This is your place."

"Not any more..."

"Always."

When he said this, she opened her eyes, and ventured to look at him again. She was so very beautiful, even all sad and blotchy and wet from crying. And with all her hair gone. He couldn't resist touching her, and so he reached with his finger and tapped her lightly on the side of her wrist. Barely a touch, and still it reminded him that she was real, and alive, and looking at him.

"I didn't want to come back," she repeated. "I swore I never would."

"I'm glad you did," Ron told her, quietly.

"Are you?" she asked.

"More than you can possibly imagine."

"You told me never to come back."

"I was wrong and stupid. Often am, aren't I?"

"Yes," she quietly agreed. She studied him, and then seemed to really see him for the first time. "Oh, Ron. What have you done? Your hair..." She reached up with a shaking hand, and ran her palm over his bald head, down across his cheek.

"Yeah, well," he said with a depreciating grin. "You'll get the whole story in stunning detail from any number of people once you're feeling better, I'm sure. But, for now, rest. You're safe. I'll be here. And Moody, of course." He glanced behind him at the man in the shadows, and when he turned back her hand rested on his.

"I tried not to come back," she reminded him as she drifted off. "I didn't want to come back...I'm sorry..."

"Don't be. I'm not. I'm glad you're home."

He didn't leave her bedside all that night, and when morning came Ron only knew because Harry came in with coffee. Moody was relieved by Shacklebolt, and told Ron to get some sleep on his way out. Harry pulled Ron aside and asked how Hermione was doing.

Ron shrugged. "Fitful sleep. Pretty intense nightmares. The healers gave her some draughts, but they just made it more difficult to wake her when she started screaming."

"You looked exhausted."

"Doesn't matter." Ron wasn't about to leave. Though, he thought he could take a coffee.

Harry seemed to understand this. "Any idea when they might release her?"

He shook his head. "Most of her injuries are a week old. The magic's too ingrained, and the healers don't think they'll be able to do much."

"The burns?" Harry asked.

"And the cuts. She was hit by a Cutting Curse a couple of times, I guess. They said that someone did try to heal her, but they did a botched job. Probably the same people who smuggled her back into England. They managed to get the cuts sealed, and the wounds will, of course, heal on their own. Eventually. They'll scar over." Ron hung his head. "She cried when they told her."

"What matters is that she's safe. And we've got to keep her that way."

"Agreed," Ron said.

"And we've got to make sure this kind of thing never happens to her again," Harry said.

Ron shook his head. "I won't, mate. I'll never drive her away again—"

"I'm not talking about you," Harry said, impatiently. "She was defenseless, Ron. The Death Eaters attacked her unarmed. They knew she was wandless. She made too easy a target."

"But what do we-?"

"Come on," Harry said, and turned to leave.

"What? No. I'm not going anywhere. She's still—"

"Asleep," Harry told him, irritation in his voice. "And we've got work to do. We'll be back before she even knows you're gone."

Ron glanced back at the door, divided. He knew that if there was a way to help keep Hermione safe he needed to act, and he did trust Harry implicitly in that department. But leaving felt wrong somehow. What if she had another nightmare? Who would wake her and help her through it? What if she wasn't there when he returned? He found it a very real fear him.

"I need you as back-up," Harry told him. "We need a united front. For Hermione."

"For Hermione," Ron acquiesced. "Let's just do this fast."

When Ron agreed, he'd no idea that twenty minutes later he'd be standing outside the Minister of Magic's office door next to Harry who was refusing to budge an inch until he got to see Scrimgeour. And Harry had called him Scrimgeour, too. Not the Minister. Not even Mister. The undersecretary had disappeared inside the door both nervous and offended.

"What are you doing?" Ron asked, a little nervous himself.

"Just follow my lead," Harry muttered. And instant later the door swung wide open, and then two of them went in un-ushered.

The current Minister of Magic was a formidably large man, with more hair than his head could reasonably hold, and it seemed to radiate from his face like a great flower, all reds and oranges, with a streak of grey shooting out from his temples. Ron was a bit jealous when he first saw him.

"Potter!" Scrimgeor called out. "Damn it, Potter! I don't have time to cater to the whim of teenagers. There are protocols, boy! Appointments!"

"I'm hardly any teenager. But you know that, which is why I'm standing in your office," Harry said firmly, confidently. Ron did a double-take just to make sure Harry wasn't being Imperiused. Never had he heard his friend speak to an adult in such a manner, let alone the Minister himself.

"Quite," Scrimgeor allowed. "And still..."

"This won't take long. I've come to ask for a favor."

"Favor? I don't do favors! I'm the Minister of Magic!"

"You'll do this favor," Harry said, again with such certainty, and without so much as a hint of arrogance. There was something of Dumbledore in his demeanor.

"And why would I do any such thing? Are you going to blackmail me, Potter? Hold a wand to my head? What blasted thing do you want from me?"

"It's not what I want," Harry told him. "It's what I need. Let's agree, for the sake of this particular argument, that even if I'm not the Chosen One as the prophecy insists, then at the very least Voldemort believes me to be him, and in this particular war that amounts to the same thing. You need me to get Voldemort, and I need Hermione Granger. Wanded."

Each time Harry said Voldemort's name Scrimgeor gave an involuntary shudder, but when he heard Hermione's name the Minister stood bolt-straight. "No. Can't be done."

"It has to be. She's one of my inner circle. She knows too much about me and my army. Recently she was attacked by a group of Death Eaters bent on getting that information from her, one way or the other, and I can't have that. I need her able to, at the very least, defend herself."

"She cast an Unforgivable!" Scrimgeor shouted. "There are some who believe she should be in Azkaban for the rest of her life!"

"And," Harry reminded him. "There are some who believe that she's a hero. Draco Malfoy, an admitted Death Eater, is after all, in custody. It's hardly political suicide."

"And what would you know about political suicide," the Minister demanded.

"I know that if I go to the Daily Prophet now, as their Chosen One, and tell them that an essential tool in my efforts to defeat the most evil and powerful wizard of all time was being withheld from me by the Minister of Magic, that it could make life very, very difficult for you."

For a moment Scrimgeor stared at him, mouth opened in surprise. Then he said: "You're bluffing. You don't need Miss Granger – she's unstable!"

"So's Ron, here," Harry said, and jabbed his thumb at Ron. "And he's my Smisurato."

This had Scrimgeor almost speechless. "You're never!"

"Sorry," Ron said, "but I am."

The Minister collapsed in his chair behind his desk, staring at Ron. "You're a Smisurato? Is that even possible?"

"Yes," Ron said, this time more confident.

"Impossible," the Minister insisted, though he didn't sound as if he thought it so. "And...the others...Miss Granger...?"

"Everyone in my army has a role to play. You don't think defeating the most powerful wizard of all time is easy, do you? It's not a one-man job. I need Hermione wanded," Harry repeated, his voice pointed enough to get the Minister's attention. "And I need you to do it. Only

you can overturn a judge's decision, in the interest of the whole magical world. I need it done today."

"I won't do it."

"We're your last great hope of defeating Voldemort," Harry reminded him. "No one is playing around here. It's him or me, the prophecy says so, and I rather think you want me over him."

"Prophecy, prophecy!" Scrimgeour said in frustration. He slammed his fist on his desk. "Damn prophecies. Cause more trouble than they're worth!"

Ron agreed.

"Two more things," Harry said, as he headed back to the door. Was he leaving? Ron was confused – Scrimgeour hadn't agreed to give Hermione back her wand, had he? "The first is that I'd rather Ron's unique abilities remain a secret between us. The last thing we need is Voldemort getting a bit of intel like that."

Again Scrimgeour flinched at Voldemort's name. "And what's the second?"

"Just a thank you," Harry told him. "I know to you we seem very young and inexperienced. But the Fates have set things up this way for a reason, I think, and I have every intention of coming out the other end of this war the victor, for the sake of the wizarding world as well as my own. Hermione Granger is an integral part of that." He left, then, without giving the Minister a chance to respond. Ron hurried after him.

Once they were away from the Minister's office, Ron watched his friend from the corner of his eye. Harry was still determined as they walked along the corridors, but he seemed older than his seventeen years.

"You were brilliant back there," Ron told him. "But do you think he'll do it?"

"He will," Harry said. "He doesn't want to, but he will."

"I don't know where you get your nerve, but it was brilliant, I say." This brought a faint smile to Harry's face.

"Get back to hospital," Harry told him. "Give my love to Hermione."

"What?" Ron asked. "Where are you off to?"

"Just a little research. I've got a couple of leads to check out before lessons tonight. You're coming to lessons, aren't you?"

"Uh...of course." Ron hadn't really thought about it. Hermione was his top priority. "As long as everything is all right at St. Mungo's."

"Right, then," Harry said, and took an unexpected turn down a fork in the corridor. "See you then."

The healers finished with Hermione's wounds later that afternoon, and it was decided that Tonks, Shacklebolt and Moody would escort her to the manse, where she would stay during her convalescence. The protections on number 12 would keep her hidden, and there she would be in the heart of the Order, where people would come and go at all hours to keep a supportive eye on her. Ron's mum had made a fuss, wanting Hermione at the Burrow with her, but in the end she agreed, admitting that Headquarters was probably a safer environment.

Ron helped Hermione move back in, though it didn't take much more than escorting her back to the manse and walking with her up to her room. All of what she'd taken with her to Bulgaria had been lost. She surveyed the room silently, and then sat on the side of the bed looking unsure and nervous. "Doesn't quite feel right, does it?" she asked in a small voice.

"Crookshanks is still at the Burrow. Mum'll care for him until you're up to it again. He sleeps in the garden, mostly. Chases the gnomes."

"It's cold in here."

Ron pulled out his wand and lit the fireplace. "Maybe we should...you know...talk?"

She ran a hand over her face, and when her fingers found the burn on her cheek, she sat a little straighter; like she'd forgotten it was there. That was good, Ron decided. It meant they didn't hurt too much. She wiped the salve on her jeans. "I'd rather we didn't," she said. "At least, not tonight. I don't think I could bear fighting with you tonight."

"I...I didn't mean fight," he said. "Just talk. But if you're not up to it, maybe...do you want me to leave?"

"No," she said quickly. "If you would stay, that would be...please..."

He went over to the other side of her bed, and crawled up on to the mattress. "Come here."

He relaxed against the pillow and the headboard, and she lay down beside him. Her eyes closed when her head hit the pillow. It was still a shock to see her with so little hair – a feature Ron hadn't really considered on Hermione before, but now with its absence he found he thought about it a lot. He wanted to touch her head again, to run his fingers through the short, dark crop that was left. He didn't dare touch her, though. To him she seemed a stray pup, in desperate need of care and attention and fearful of all attempts to capture her. He'd wait, he decided, and let her come to him. If she ever would.

Twice she opened her eyes to blink at him before her lids finally became too heavy and she drifted to sleep. The healers said she might sleep a lot for the first couple of days. Ron had asked, not knowing what to expect. His mother had stood beside him, wide-eyed when he'd spoken to the healers, but she hadn't said a word. She'd assumed, he guessed, that she would be the one to care for Hermione. She had been wrong.

That night Harry didn't make it back for the lessons, and while Lupin didn't seem concerned, Ron was. "Did he take anyone with him?" he asked Lupin as they went into the converted dining room. "Shacklebolt?"

"I don't know where he is or who he's with," Lupin said breezily. "Welcome back, Hermione." Lupin smiled and offered her a hug, which she accepted somewhat belatedly. Hermione wore a tracksuit and trainers, and she still looked incredibly thin. The awkward moment was over nearly as soon as it had begun, though, as Lupin produced that day's Daily Prophet.

"Last page," he said as he handed the paper to Hermione. Harry, of course, was on the front.

She opened the paper, while Lupin contained his excitement, and scanned halfway down the page. Her eyes went wide as she read: "A full pardon has been issued to one Miss Hermione Granger, who, earlier this month underwent a challenging hearing for her use of an Unforgivable on the admitted Death Eater Draco Malfoy. Do to compelling information as yet unreleased by the Ministry (which this paper speculates contains details concerning the abduction, imprisonment and subsequent torture of Miss Granger) the Minister himself has decreed that Miss Granger can once again carry an Apparition license and a wand. As the time of this printing Miss Granger could not be located for comment."

"We'll want to start your lessons again right away," Lupin said as he took the paper back and tossed it near the door. "You've missed quite a bit, but I'm sure you'll be back up to snuff in no time at all. We've been working on a few advanced Shielding and Reversal Spells. We don't want to have to wait to find a Counterjinx in the heat of battle, now do we? There are a few Reversal Spells that can cover a wide variety of curses and hexes, with at least some positive effects—" Lupin stopped short when he realized Hermione wasn't nearly as thrilled with the news as he was. Ron had watched her the whole time, and while he didn't understand her reaction, he knew she was terribly upset by what she'd read.

"What is it?"

Hermione shook her head, and turned away from the both of them. Ron hoped she wasn't crying again. Once she started these days, it seemed difficult for her to stop.

Lupin gave Ron a little shrug, and then waved him toward her. Ron didn't know if it was such a good idea for him to approach her, but Lupin seemed to think it was. When he came up beside her, he stared at the dark fireplace with her. He waited a moment before asking: "You OK?"

She nodded a little. "I cast an Unforgivable, and I was forgiven."

"You gave Draco only a very, very little of what he did to you."

"That doesn't make it right."

"No," Ron agreed. "But you've paid in other ways. You've paid enough."

Her hand rose to the burn on her neck. It still looked painful, but she touched it, so Ron reckoned the salve had healed it enough. "I did this," she told him. "I took Viktor's wand out of his dead hand and I tried to Burn Peter Pettigrew. The wand was broken, and I didn't realize. He thought it was funny. He hit me with the same spell a couple of more times. But this one...I did this one."

Wormtail was there? This was certainly something Harry should know. Ron wished he was there, because if nothing else Harry seemed to know how to help Hermione when she was upset.

"I shouldn't have a wand, Ron," she continued, now looked up into his face. "I'm dangerous."

"The wand was broken."

"Why did you do this?" she asked, shaking her head. "I know it was you, Ron. You and Harry. The whole thing smacks of the both of you."

"We need you," he said simply. "And you need a wand."

She considered him for a minute or so, and then sighed and shook her head again before turning back to Lupin. "I suppose you want me to get my Apparation license back, as well?"

"Welcome home, Hermione," Lupin said, grinning.

"Yes, yes! Welcome home!" Tonks rushed into the room, and went straight for Lupin, kissed him on the cheek, turned, handed the bundle of baby in her arms to Ron, kissed Ron on the cheek, and then left again without another word. Lupin watched her go, a little troubled by her terse appearance, but then turned to Hermione with a grin.

"Have you met my son?" he asked.

Ron turned and twisted to give her a better view of Jack, who was blinking up at her with his tiny, dark blue eyes. He was swaddled quite tightly, and Ron figured she'd brought him on her broom. Jack gurgled a little, and then spit up, and Ron used a corner of his blanket to wipe his face clean. When he looked up Hermione was staring at him.

"Wha'?" he asked. "He's cute, isn't he?"

"He's lovely." She glanced between Lupin and Ron, and then back down at the baby. "And she gave him to you?"

"Well, you see..." But Ron didn't even know how to begin. So much had happened between him and Tonks and Lupin and, of course, Jack in the past few weeks. Helping to deliver Jack had made Ron an honorary member of their family with all the benefits and, strangely, responsibilities there in. Lupin treated him more like a friend or a brother than a pupil, and Tonks – well, Ron would say she thought of him like a brother, but he had a feeling that Tonks liked him more than his real siblings did. Ginny never kissed him on the cheek or called him handsome or smiled at him just because he entered the room. She even made him cookies – very bad, impossible to eat, hard as rocks cookies, but cookies, nonetheless. And she trusted him with Jack – they both did – which was both disconcerting and

astonishing at the same time. And Jack, for all his two weeks of life, seemed to like Ron just fine.

Ron looked over to Lupin, who was smiling at his son.

"I thought you didn't like babies," Hermione said, somewhat bluntly.

"Well, Jack, he's all right, isn't he?" Jack yawned, and Ron gave a chuckle. Then he realized Hermione was thinking of that fight they'd had the night before she ran off. "Oh. Well. I never said I didn't like babies," he reminded her, and he tried to do it gently. He didn't want to rehash old issues, especially now that she was newly back. And Lupin was in the room.

"My mistake," she muttered, or at least that's what he thought she said, because she turned away from him. "Congratulations," she said to Lupin, and managed to sound reasonably sincere, so Ron thought, perhaps, she was going to be all right. But then she walked out of the room without acknowledging him again. He was sunk.

"It's never going to work. She hates me now."

"She Loves you," Lupin insisted.

"Yes, but she hates me. Too much has happened. Too much was said."

"Hate is a very strong emotion, Ron, and while I don't doubt she feels strongly about you, my sense is that she's terribly angry at the world right now."

Jack began to fuss a bit, and Ron swayed the way he liked and patted his little bottom. "It's more than that. I'm so...I don't want to lose her again. I know I'll say something stupid – Merlin's beard! I say stupid things all the time! But I never know what's going to set her off – and well, she's...a girl. They don't think normal."

Lupin chuckled. "No, no they don't. Why don't we have some tea and take our lesson in the kitchen. I think our time might be better spent on non-magical things this evening."

Three hours later Ron and Lupin were still in the thick of it, leaning back in their chairs sipping butter beers, burping, and pondering the female sex. Lupin had taken him through the ins and outs of the female psyche, while his son slumbered boneless across his narrow chest. Ron did ask a few clarifying questions, but on the whole he sat back and let Lupin talk.

"Understanding them is all well, and fine, but at the end of the day, after all is said and done, women are essentially simple creatures. No, they are, Ron, I swear it. All women, no matter how old or young, big or little, strong or weak – all women want one thing. And that one thing is really so very easy."

"Well, what the bloody hell is it? 'Cause I could use a bit of easy at the moment."

Lupin grinned at him like he was about to divulge the secret to life, and Ron leaned forward. "Women want to be adored."

Ron blinked. "That's it? That's your big revelation? Hours of nonsense about women's feelings, and nurturer verses hunter, and delicate balance, and you boil it down to women want to be adored? Of course they want to be adored! Everybody bloody wants to be adored! But women also want clothes and gossip and to be right all the time! Women want the world, and they want it on their terms! Yes, and books, if they're Hermione!"

Lupin shook his head. "All that other stuff is set dressing. Women simply want to be adored. You adore your woman, and you'll have her for life."

Ron was skeptical. "Hermione's more complicated than that."

"Yes, well, she's always been a complicated young witch, made all the more so by the events of this past year, I do admit that. But if you're patient, and you adore her – which I know you secretly do anyhow – then everything will be fine."

This struck a nerve with Ron. Moody had said much the same thing to him a month ago. "Is Loving the same as adoring? I was told that I have only one purpose in this life, and that's to Love her."

"Hmm. Sounds like Mad-Eye. He's very big on our great Cosmic Purpose. But no, it's not the same at all. Love is something that you do for yourself. Adoration is something you do for someone else. Let me see if I can say this properly...you Love her because the Fates demand it, that's Mad Eye's point, I believe. You love her because, well, because your heart feels good when you do; you look forward to seeing her because of the way she makes you feel – you miss her when she's not there because of the way she makes you feel...that sort of thing. But you adore her so that she knows she's Loved and loved. Yes, that sounds right," Lupin said, somewhat proud of himself. He swallowed down the last of his beer and gave the noblest belch Ron had ever heard.

"So, I write her love poetry and give her flowers and that nonsense, do I? I think I'd rather fall on my wand."

"No, no," Lupin assured with a chuckle. "That's not you, and it's certainly not Hermione. I mean, yes, every girl likes to get flowers from time to time. But if I showed up with a dozen sunblazes every time I saw Tonks I think she'd have my liver for breakfast. She's not really that sort of witch, either."

"Then...well," Ron said, and then swallowed. "What do you do? To adore her, I mean?"

"I just do, Ron. In fact, I adored her even before I knew it. I think that's why she was so keen on me, even when I tried to push her away – for her own good, mind. She could do a lot better than an old, haggard, beast like me. Thank the stars she didn't want to, I say. And you will, too, once you get the hang of it."

"Yes, but how?"

"That, my friend, is something you're going to have to discover on your own."

"You can't be serious," Ron scoffed. "What are the odds that I'm going to discover anything on my own? You've got to give me something."

With an exaggerated sigh and a roll of the eyes, Lupin gave in. "You might try, well, not correcting her. Even when she's mistaken. And you might try doing something that you know she enjoys, even if you don't."

"What do you mean? What does she enjoy?"

"She likes books well enough," Lupin suggested. "You might try reading with her."

This left Ron speechless. Read with Hermione? For fun? "But...what?"

Lupin waved him down. "Don't let your brain explode. It was just an idea. But the key to adoration is to think about the other person as if, well, you want to actively do something to make them happy. You want her to be happy, don't you?"

"Well, sure. But do I have to read? Why would that make her happy? Is that what she wants?"

"Don't lose focus. She wants to be adored. So, just adore her."

"By reading a book? Do I have to read the whole book? What if it's just a chapter? Or a page? What kind of book? Something of Quidditch might be all right - we're not talking about *Hogwarts: A History*, are we?"

"Forget the books, Ron. Think of something else. Actually, don't. Don't plan it. With Hermione, I'd imagine the spontaneous might work better. And for you, as well. Just...when you see her next, think about making her happy and see where that takes you."

"It's not going to take me to a book, that's for bloody sure!"

"Yes," said Lupin. "I think we both can agree on that now."

The next morning Harry showed up just as Ron, Hermione, and Ron's mum were finishing up a breakfast of kippers and toast. He looked tired but happy, and as he slid down into one of the arm chairs at the table, Ron got the impression that he seemed a lot more relaxed than he'd been in a very long time. Hermione, who'd been gone for a very long time and therefore didn't know if he looked more relaxed or not, watched him with a suspicious expression. Apparently something seemed out of place to her, as well.

"Bacon?" Ron's mum asked Harry.

"Bacon?" Ron asked. "We didn't get any bacon."

She ignored Ron. "I can fry some up lickety-split."

"Coffee's fine," Harry told her pleasantly.

"Nonsense," said she, and waved a dismissive hand. "I'll make some bacon. And more kippers. And you'll want some porridge with honey and..." She wandered back to the stove still mumbling to herself a list of foods to make. Ron watched as she pulled out a couple of heavy pans, and worried that her coddling seemed a little manic. She wasn't enjoying it as much as she usually did.

Beside him, Hermione made an odd sniffing sound, and Ron turned to find her smiling at Harry, and Harry going very red in the face as he buttoned the top most button on his shirt. The collar didn't quite go up high enough, though, and two thumb-sized bruises peeked out. Harry dropped his elbow to the table and rested his neck against his hand in an attempt to cover the marks.

So much for research, Ron thought. And he'd been worried about Harry getting into trouble. "You missed lessons last night," Ron reminded him with a little edge to his voice. If Harry was going to run around with his sister, the least he could do was tell Ron so he wouldn't have to worry about him being in mortal peril.

"Yes, well, time got away, and...well..."

"Here are some kippers, dear, to start you off." Ron's mum dropped a plate of smoked fish and buttered bread in front of him.

"Uh, thanks, Mrs. Wealsey, but honestly, I'm not that hungry."

"Of course you are," she said with a staunch certainty.

Ron reached across the table and stole a slice of bread for himself, while Hermione just rolled her eyes.

"I think I've to thank you," she said after a moment, when the two boys had their mouths full. "I officially received my full pardon by owl this morning. Though it went to my parent's house in Kent, first. The Ministry doesn't seem to know how to find me, it seems."

"That's how we want it, at least for now," Harry said around a cheek full of fish and butter. "Keep everyone in the dark."

"Yes, well, thank you," she said to Harry. "And you, Ron. I should've said it last night. I supposed I was overwhelmed."

"Really, it was Harry—"

"It was both of us," Harry assured her.

"Yes, well, there are some things you both should know. Things I learned while I was...away." She played with her thumb nail as she spoke. "I know the curses the Death Eaters are using – at least the ones they used on us. And I know what Defensive Spells they've got lined up. And it was pretty clear how they attacked – their strategy, I mean. And, of course, I recognized a couple of them. But I saw them all, so if there were photos I could identify—"

"How many?" Harry asked, leaning forward.

"Well, initially there were at least ten or twelve. They swarmed into the fairy grove from all sides, so they must've been tipped off—"

"Fairy grove?" Ron asked.

"All sides sounds like an ambush," Harry said.

"Viktor's family wasn't exactly thrilled with my arrival," Hermione admitted, "but I can't think that they would've told the Death Eaters about the ceremony. Or if they did, I'm sure they didn't know the Death Eaters would drag Viktor away and force him to join them."

"Wait," said Ron, "what ceremony?"

"Viktor became a Death Eater? I didn't know they could compel someone to do that. Isn't there an oath or something?" Harry asked.

Hermione's eyes dropped. "There are many ways to make someone do something they don't want to do. They threatened him with my death, which was stupid as that was their intention all along, anyway."

"You were at a ceremony in a fairy grove?" As far as Ron knew there was only one ceremony performed in a fairy grove, and that was a wedding. "Hermione?"

"So they took him and turned him before you were married?" Harry asked, working through the timeline in his head.

"Yes, knowing that if I willingly married him after he was a Death Eater I would automatically become one, too. Dark Mark and all. But if they waited until after we were married, then they wouldn't be able to get to me. Or rather, I should say, get to what I know about you, Harry. And the Order."

"You were getting married?" Ron asked, completely gobsmacked. He'd spent many a night wondering if she was doing just that, but to know that she was – Ron shook his head. "You were really going to marry him?"

Hermione huffed. "Well, his parents were very old fashioned, and they insisted on a wedding if I was going to be staying. The way they went on, you'd think I was a spinster or something—"

"Hermione," Harry said. "You didn't marry him, though. You don't have the Dark Mark."

"No. When he was returned...he refused to marry me. He didn't want what had happened to him to happen to me. But even more than that, I couldn't let them get to you through me. And I knew that's what it would've meant to marry Viktor. Oh, Harry. They did that to him because of me!"

"Not because of you," Harry insisted.

"When they returned him and we refused to go through with the ceremony, the Death Eaters attacked." Her lips trembled. "Viktor threw me to the side and I managed to find cover. The Death Eaters were prepared for battle, and the rest, well, they were there for a wedding. It was a slaughter." Her eyes went unfocused as she got lost in the memory. Her face wore a pained expression, made all the more terrible with her short hair and scars and burns. "Avada Kedavra is over too quickly. Viktor was dead before he hit the ground. They killed him because of me. Just like your father." She said this to Ron, of course, but she didn't look at him. She stared down at the table, and tears filled her eyes, but didn't fall.

Ron looked up at his mother, and at the mention of his father she froze in her stirring, looked stricken. They couldn't talk about him any longer. Just after the funeral it had been almost a comfort to share memories of Ron's dad, to think aloud what he might be doing if... Now, the entire subject had grown too painful for his mum. Tonks had explained that Ron's dad's death was finally sinking in, and Ron's mum was learning to deal with the "finality of what had happened." To Ron, it seemed more like she was cracking up.

When Ron's mum turned, Hermione met her watery gaze, held it for a moment or two, and then ran from the room.

"Well?" Ron's mum said expectantly to him. "Go after her!"

"I think maybe I'll give her a minute," Ron said, and shoved another piece of bread in his mouth.

"Coward," she muttered under her breath. She turned, hesitated as he eyes swept over Harry and the bruises that peaked over the collar

on his green shirt. She smirked, rolled her eyes, muttered something about teenagers, and then turned back to the stove. Three steps later she froze.

"Harry, dear," she said without turning to look at him. Her voice was overly sugared, and Ron thought she might be fighting a fit of panic. "Tell me that's not Hermione's work." Hermione's name came out like sandpaper.

Harry looked blankly at Ron, clueless. "Uh..."

"Not Hermione," Ron said, not really wanting to be in this conversation.

She whipped around and demanded: "You're sure?"

Ron nodded.

"Then, Harry. Dear. Tell me that's never my Ginny. My baby girl who is supposed to be safe at Hogwarts. My sweet innocent little girl – tell me she didn't make those marks on your neck."

Harry's eyes went wide as he finally understood. His hand jumped to his neck again. "Er..."

Now Ron's mum turned to Harry, and she had the furies in her eyes. "What did you do to her?"

Harry bolted up from the chair and backed a couple of paces away. "Er..."

"It's seven in the bleeding morning, Harry James Potter! Just what were you doing with my daughter?"

"Not – not what you're thinking," he said quickly. "We just...we-we were snogging and things got a little carried away – but we didn't...we weren't..." His face flushed a deep, dark red, and he began to sweat a little. "I should've told you, Mrs. Weasley – we both should've told you that we're back together. It just happened so soon

after...well, after Mr. Weasley...and then Hermione..." Harry glanced in Ron's direction for help. There wasn't any to offer.

"Did you...did you...with her?"

"No! No, last night we just talked and snogged—"

"Have you ever? With my Ginny? Have you shagged her?" The word was vulgar coming out of his mum's mouth, and even Ron winced on Harry's behalf when she spit it out at him. The decision to lie or not to lie didn't seem to come easy to Harry, and Ron watched him struggle with it.

"Yes," Harry said, hanging his head. "We did once. Afterwards, we knew it was too soon for us, which is why last night we didn't let things get that far. But I can't regret it, Mrs. Weasley. And I don't think Ginny does, either. I love her—"

"Love? You're seventeen! What do you know about love?"

Ron knew this cut Harry deeper than anything else she could've said, and Harry, the boy with the loveless childhood, physically recoiled. "I've known Love," he told her. "So, I know what I feel for Ginny is true. It's...mature, even if I'm seventeen. I know that I could look my whole life and never find in anyone else what I have with her. She's the strongest, bravest, sweetest, most honest person I've ever known, and every day that I don't get to see her or talk to her is a day wasted. I know I want to spend the rest of my life making her happy. Just as happy as she makes me."

Tears rolled down Ron's mum's round cheeks, and her chin quivered with emotion. "Harry, dear, but what happens when you finally face You-Know-Who? When you don't come home to her? How is she supposed to pick up the pieces and go on with life? You're going to do battle with the most deadly wizard in the world! If she loves you, Harry, her grief will be..." She shook her head over the unspoken finish to that sentence. Her grief will be mine, he knew she'd wanted to say.

"I had thought you understood that. We had thought – Arthur and I – that you broke up with her last summer because you understood that Ginny can't be allowed to get too close to you. That you shouldn't let her fall in love with you."

"I can't control that, Mrs. Weasley. Ginny will love who she loves. And I'm the luckiest sod in the world that she's chosen to love me. I will survive, if only for her. Because now that I know love, I've no intention of leaving it behind."

Behind her the bacon was burning. Ron pulled out his wand and called it to the table, along with the skillet of eggs. Both hovered centimeters over the wood table, waiting patiently to be served up.

His mother watched this, and him, and dropped down in a seat at the table as if exhausted. "I suppose you're shagging Hermione, too," she said in a sad, almost forlorn voice to Ron, who froze, spoon in hand, shocked that his mother would ask him so blunt a question. Was she looking for an answer?

"Ugh," he said. Harry smirked, sat down opposite him, but didn't offer any help.

"Yes, well, you're Fated, so I suppose that's inevitable," she muttered more to herself than to Ron. "No sense trying to keep the two of you apart, is there? And, I suppose she is eighteen. But that's still so very young. Where has your childhood gone? When I was your age...yes, well...those were different times, I suppose."

"When you were my age, what?" Ron prompted. "You were married at eighteen, weren't you? Dad was just nineteen?"

"Well, it was the '60's! We were wild then, and we didn't have You-Know-Who gallivanting around terrorizing the wizarding world, now did we? And, yes, we were young. Too young. Things would've gone so much smoother for your father and I if we had waited. Those first couple of years were difficult. Of course, the first couple of years always are, I suppose. And if we had waited we probably wouldn't have had Ginny." Her eyes shot to Harry's.

"You know I love you, Harry, don't you? Thought of you as a son for ages now. And I'm not really all together unhappy that you and Ginny are dating again. But you'll take good care of her, won't you? You'll treat her right? She's my only daughter, Harry, my baby. She's grown up too fast."

"I'll be as good to Ginny as I know how. But, Mrs. Weasley, we're not going anywhere. You'll know that I'm doing right by her, and I expect you'll take me aside if I don't."

"You boys know the Birth Control Charms, don't you? Now, don't look at me like that! Either of you! Certainly you'll agree that a surprise of that nature would be terrible right now. Trying to protect a baby while this war is waging – it's inconceivable! No pun intended, of course. And Ginny still has another year at Hogwarts, Harry. I will see that girl graduated! You know the Speciallus Charm, don't you? Or the Night Palm Charm – that you can cast on her, I think it's good for a couple of hours at least-"

"Er...eh, Mum," said Ron. "I think I'd rather have this conversation with someone who didn't have seven children. I'll go check on Hermione now," Ron said quickly, and escaped despite his mother's repeated calls for him to come back.

Lucas, Stein, and Karouwacky's Fine Sticks and Poking Sundries certainly wasn't Ollivander's, but as Hermione needed a wand and Ollivander and his store contents had disappeared over a year before, Karouwacky's was as good as any other wand store around. They were located in the small, leaning shop directly next to Scrivenshaft's Quill Shop, and from the front door Ron could smell the sugary candies at Honeydukes just down the street.

Winter was still very much with Hogsmeade, and Hermione and Ron trudged through the white, crunchy snow in their new boots – Ron's because he'd once again out-grown his old boots and Hermione because, like the rest of her clothes, she'd had to leave the old pair behind when she'd fled Bulgaria. Karouwacky's was pleasantly warm inside. They were greeted at the door by a short, sprightly fellow who introduced himself as Stein.

After explaining that Hermione was in need of a new wand, and that her last one was an eleven inch vine wood with a dragon heartstring, Stein went to one of the lower shelves and began pulling out possible candidates for her to try. A green box on the top shelf bounced off, and landed on the floor next to Stein, which must've seemed as odd to the storekeep as it did Ron, because he stood there and stared at it for a moment.

"Well, now," he said with a chuckle. "Back on the shelf with you, little fellow."

He stooped grabbed the box, and pushed it back into its place, then turned and deposited the other wands he'd chosen on the counter for Hermione to go through. Five blue boxes all lined up. Hermione looked a little nervous, Ron thought, as she reached for the first. The green box jumped off the shelf, and this time propelled itself right on to the counter next to the others. Stein looked a little disconcerted, and he quickly snatched up the box and stuffed it back in its place on the top shelf. He stared at it a moment, but it looked as if it would stay put this time.

Hermione pulled out the first wand. It was longer than last one, and it was darker, almost to the point of being black. She held it firmly, aimed at a bunch of small potted flowers at the other end of the counter, and shouted: "Accio begonias!"

The green box shot out and hit her in the face.

"Oh, my," gasped Stein, and he rushed around the counter to pick up the box. Hermione held her cheek and assured the store keep she was fine. Ron rather thought she was more upset that the begonias had only moved an inch.

"I don't think this quite fits," she said, as she replaced the wand and moved on to the next.

"Er...Hermione," Ron said, hesitant to interfere in what was amounting to a stressful process for her. "What about the green one?"

Hermione eyed the box. Stein opened the lid and held it up for her perusal. "Willow," he said. "Ten and a half inches, with a single kneazle whisker at its center."

"Willow?" Hermione asked. "I'm not a willow, surely." She picked up the wand anyway, and gave it a try. "Accio begonias!" The flowers whipped across the room and she caught them easily with her off hand. Skeptically, she waved the wand around a little. "Too swishy," she complained. "It feels wrong."

She put it back in the box, but it jumped out and she screeched as it planted itself firmly in the seat pocket of her jeans. Ron grabbed the flowers from her just as she was about to drop them. She yanked the wand out and glared at it. "I've been violated!"

"Well, it seems we have a match!" Stein said happily. "That'll be eight galleons, if you please?"

"I don't please!" Hermione snapped. "I don't want this one. I want a vine wood!" She put the wand down on the counter, but it jumped back up and forced itself back into her pocket, even though she twisted around to get away from it and covered her bottom with her hands.

"Yes, well," said Stein. "That'll be the kneazle in it. They're very particular about their masters – er, mistresses, I should say. Good at detecting trustworthiness in a person, too. I'm told there's a warm sensation when the mistress should be warned, but I've never actually felt it for myself. I specialize in the more traditional centers – unicorn tales, dragon heartstrings and the like."

"I don't want a willow!" she insisted, struggling with the wand.

"Mine's a willow, you know? Unicorn tail hair."

"Yes, I'm aware of what your wand is made of, Ron!" she said testily, still fighting the wand. It was rather comical, actually, to see her wrestle with a piece of wood, but Ron didn't dare laugh. At the moment it looked as if the wand might win.

"Eight galleons," Stein said again, this time gave an expectant look to Ron. With Hermione occupied, Ron huffed and dug into his pocket. He knew they'd be shopping, and so he got some gold out of Gringotts, but when he glanced at the coins in his fist it was obvious he was short. Three galleons, three sickles, and seven knuts, enough for any reasonable shopping spree, but wands were expensive.

"No!" shouted Hermione, having wrestled the wand to the ground. "Don't pay him, Ron! I don't like this wand!" It shot up at this, Hermione still attached, and bolted out the front doors. The last Ron saw of her were the dark soles of her boots as they flew through the air and out the door.

Stein coughed and held out his hand. She'd left the store with the merchandise, so payment would be expected. "Suppose I could write you a magi-check. Do you have a quill?"

Lessons that week consisted of Tonks and Hermione in the kitchen working on her Apparition (her test was to be the following week), while Moody worked with Harry and Ron in the dining room on non-verbal Offensive Spells. Harry was quite good, and proved a true aim as well. Ron, on the other hand, had only managed to get a Cutting Curse out once (and even then he had to move his lips) and he ripped a hole in the ceiling so wide Ron could see Crookshanks peering down disgustedly at him from atop Hermione's bed one floor up. He'd missed the target by a good three meters in all three directions.

Moody cuffed him, and raised his wand as if to hex him again, but then decided against it. He grabbed Ron by the back of the neck and practically pushed him down the stairs and into the kitchen where Hermione promptly disappeared with a deafening CRACK! Tonks looked from the circle Hermione had been standing in, to the other chalk circle drawn on the slate floor to her left. Hermione didn't reappear. They waited for a minute, but she didn't return.

"Well, she can't have Apparated out of the manse," Tonks said with a sigh. "Your wards have seen to that."

"This one's about as worthless," Moody grumbled. "Couldn't hit the side of a mountain with a sneeze! It's pathetic!"

Hermione wandered in at this point, looking a little dazed. "I think I ended up on the ceiling again. I came to on the floor next to Harry's bed. Wish I'd landed on it, instead." She rubbed at the back of her head.

"I've been more than patient," Moody said, with a great deal of impatience in his voice. "Nymphadora, they've had a week—"

"No, Alastor, it's far too soon for them!"

"There's no time to waste. Every day they don't improve is another day closer to Harry going into battle on his own. He needs pimple here to do his part, and he can't with his head up his arse! Now, I say I've been patient enough! It's time for the cupboard!"

Ron gave Hermione a questioning look, but she seemed just as lost as he was.

"And I say it's too soon! As bad as they are right now, things could get worse if we rush them—"

Moody ignored her and conjured a tall, narrow cupboard right there in the middle of the room. It had all the breadth and depth of a grandfather clock. "All right, the both of you! Inside!"

Hermione peered into the cramped space and then back at Moody. "You're joking, surely."

"You first, pimple! And keep those hands up! Now you, missy. Help her, pimple! Criminy, that sod has all the manners of a toad! I said hands up, Weasley! No getting fresh. Right, then, elbows in. In farther, Granger!"

The two of them stood body crammed against body, Ron's arms folded up above her head, and Hermione's down at her side – which was causing the problem. The cupboard was so very small that they both had to fold themselves in order for the doors to close.

"Figure it out, Granger! You're the bright one in the bunch."

She jutted out her jaw, stared past Ron, and wrapped her arms around his neck. Thus folded, Moody slammed the doors, gave them a tap, and even though Ron didn't think it was possible, the cupboard got even smaller.

It was warm in there. And every inch of Hermione was touching every inch of Ron, and he closed his eyes and tried to think about Quidditch.

"Um...Ron?"

"Hm?"

"Why are we in a cupboard?"

"Well..." It was a good question, Ron thought. "I don't really know. But I reckon it has something to do with how badly our lessons have gone."

"And this is supposed to help, how exactly?"

"Well..." These really were questions she should've asked Moody before she got in, Ron decided. "Again, I'm just guessing, but it's probably because our magic is tied to our emotions – well, mine is, at least. And they have decided that, because our lessons are still going so poorly that there must be some emotional problem that needs to be worked through between us. I think they sorta assumed that once you got back my spells work would improve."

"And my face in your neck is supposed to improve your spell work?"

"This wasn't my idea."

"Oh, all right. So, how long are we in for?"

"I haven't the foggiest. Knowing Moody, though, it could be a while. That wizard is twisted."

"Hmph." She was blissfully quiet for a while then, and Ron went back to thinking about anything but the fact that he could feel her breathing with his belly.

"Uh, Ron?" she whispered.

"Hmm?"

"Do you think...could you find a way to lower your arms?"

"Uh..." The only way to maneuver was to press against her, and Ron was thankful for the dark of the closet because he felt his face go even hotter. He managed to slide one arm sort of down her back while the other found an awkward perch on her shoulder. When she jumped, she slammed them both into the wall behind him.

"Sorry," he said quickly, and tried to pull his arms away from her as much as he could.

"It's fine. It's just a little tender there still. Don't worry about it."

"There? On your...lower back?"

He felt her nod against his chest. His heart constricted. Her perfect, smooth, flawless lower back was now scarred. "Is this better?" he whispered, wrapping his arm, instead around her ribs. She nodded again, and her arms around his neck squeezed tighter. As she exhaled he was able to maneuver the other arm down, and hug her to him. She felt just a little too wonderful and he tried to think about roast beef with pudding, and cooked carrots, and baked apples. The closet got even smaller.

"You suppose there's enough air in here for the both of us, don't you? I mean, there's no light to speak of..."

"Hmm," he said. Treacle tarts with marmalade. Stuffed goose. Fish and chips. His stomach grumbled. So did another part of him.

"Uh...Ron..." He felt her pull away as far as their confines would allow.

Mortified, Ron whispered. "Stop moving. You're making it worse." Rotting corpses, he told himself, dead kittens. Puss. Blood. Spiders. It was no use. Hermione had gone stone still and his body continued to react. He tried to tilt his hips a little to find some space between that part of their anatomy, but the movement made her gasp. She must've thought he was enjoying himself. This was worse than losing all his hair. Moody was a bloody bugger, and Ron was going to double bogey hex him when they got out of there!

"Sorry," he whispered, and froze when he felt her hot breath on his cheek.

"This is what they wanted to happen. It must've been what they planned all along."

"What?" Ron asked. Surely she didn't mean...

She kissed him. Her lips on his. Soft and moist and strong. He growled in surprise at the tingles in his stomach, at the bolts of electricity sizzling through his legs and nether-parts. His heart began to pound as if he were running for his life. As soon as the kiss ended another tiny one followed, and then another and another. Kiss after glorious kiss her lips moved against his, teasing and caressing. Her fingers played at the top of his neck, and a shiver skidded down his spine. Ron groaned again.

The cupboard fell away, and Ron lost his balance. Hermione's arms around him, her body against him were the only things that kept him upright. He opened his eyes to find Moody and Tonks standing and staring, and Harry with an embarrassed grin and his arms crossed. Hermione disentangled herself from him, a smirk of satisfaction on her face. Ron had to turn away, and tried to rearrange his jeans without being too obvious about it.

"As you can see, Nymphadora," Moody said with a pompous laugh, "it was not at all too soon for the cupboard. They didn't even last ten minutes in there!"

"All right, all right," she said, waving a dismissive hand at him. She commanded Hermione back into the chalk circle, and they all watched as Hermione Disapparated, and then half a second later Apparated with one foot inside the second circle. "Much better!" Tonks praised.

"Right! You!" Moody yelled, jamming a blunt finger at Ron. "Upstairs. Let's see if you can't hit that bloody target now!"

Ron imagined the target with Moody's face at the center, and silently blew the whole thing to bits on his very first try.

They didn't talk about what had happened in the cupboard, but that night just before Ron headed back to the Burrow after his first successful lesson in months, he was feeling good, and a little reckless. Without thinking it through, he hooked an arm around Hermione's waist and kissed her again. She was surprised, but she melted into him right away, and when they parted she wore a silly grin he knew mirrored his own.

End of chapter 14

Chapter 15 – Happy Birthday, Ron

"Yeah, Love's all right. I mean, I lucked out on the girl, I think. She's brilliant. When she's not nagging or crying. She does that a lot these days: nag and cry. It's rather wearisome, really.

"When I first found out? Well, it was a bit of a shock, wasn't it? And to be honest, I don't think I really believed it. Seemed like something Loony Luna would come up with. Don't print that. It's mean.

"That's all I have to say, really."

-Ronald Weasley, interview excerpt from *Os Destinados*, by Miguel Amoro

The following week or so went by very quickly for Ron. His days were filled with the store, his evenings with lessons, and every night with dreams of Hermione. Not fun, sexy dreams, but strange and often disturbing dreams about her in a hospital bed at St. Mungo's telling him that she didn't want to come back to him. Telling him she was afraid. It was the same dream, really, looping over and over as his brain played it from different angles, at different speeds, with different outcomes.

Ron's mum took to cooking for the four of them (much to Ron's secret delight), and as Hermione hadn't yet been cleared by Moody to leave Headquarters for fear of being rediscovered by the Death Eaters, supper was eaten every night in the basement kitchen at number 12. The lecture Ron and Hermione received from both Lupin and Moody for going to Hogsmeade on their own to buy her new wand resembled in intensity one of Ron's mum's howlers – but lacked the same brevity. It wasn't likely they'd make that mistake again.

It was a Friday night when, after finishing up at the store, Ron walked in on Harry and Hermione in various states of undress: Harry with his shirt off, and Hermione in nothing but her bra and knickers. Ron stopped cold, too stunned to say anything. His heart dropped down to about his belt. His mind rebelled, and for one awful moment he held his breath and almost took his wand out.

Hermione gasped when she saw him, and grabbed for the closest piece of clothing – a t-shirt that obviously belonged to Harry, hanging on the back of the over-stuffed chair. She quickly wriggled into it.

"It's not what it looks like, mate," Harry said quickly, holding out a hand to stop Ron from bolting. "This is all completely on the level."

Ron nodded, but he didn't believe a word of it. Something dark and heavy began to boil within him again. His ears started to buzz.

"Wait," Harry said. "You've got a scar, too!" He grabbed Ron by the wrist and pulled him into the room while Hermione jumped back into her jeans and turned to do up the fly. "Take off your shirt," Harry told him.

Ron glared down at Harry's hand on his arm, and a creepy shiver raised the hairs on the back of his neck. He'd had a dream like this once. Ron thought he might be sick.

Harry seemed to read his expression because he rolled his eyes and let Ron's arm go. "Hermione's been working on some Healing Spells, and hasn't had a lot of luck. Take off your shirt. Let her try your scar."

Ron studied Hermione's flush face, as she turned around to face him again. Her eyes met his without guilt, though still a little embarrassed. Embarrassed that he should see her in her skivvies, but not Harry, it seemed. Ron clenched his jaw at the realization, and whipped his shirt off. Her eyes went wide.

The scar on his chest was from the Cave of Regret, and had turned a light, shiny shade of pink. It had spread a little on the left, and was no longer a perfect circle just below his pecks. It looked a little off as it was the only spot on his chest not covered with short, downy, ginger hair. "Kinda looks like a third nipple, doesn't it?" he quipped, a little uncomfortable with the expression on Hermione's face; something between regret and nausea. Of course, saying the word "nipple" hadn't help him feel any more at ease. He couldn't think what had made him say it.

"I think I know why I haven't had any luck with our scars," she said, not taking her eyes from Ron's chest. "Scar tissue is the result of the skin healing itself. They aren't wounds anymore. So a Healing Spell won't have any effect."

Harry looked from Ron's chest to Hermione's neck. "Then you can't Heal scars?"

"That's my theory." She glared down at the wand in her right fist. "Or this blasted thing is broken!" She threw it at the wall, and it went in like an arrow, the springy end bobbing back and forth. There were several small holes on the wall near it where she must've done the same thing before. Repeatedly.

Ron looked from one friend to another looking for any signs that the moment he'd walked in on was anything more than what it now seemed. Hermione stood there radiating frustration while Harry watched her with a bemused expression. No guilt, or awkwardness in either of them calmed Ron's jealousy a little, and he felt his face cool a little. He didn't like this familiarity between them, but Ron didn't see what he could do about it now. They'd had sex. Harry and Hermione. They'd kissed. They'd been in Love. But that was the past, and this was now. And they didn't feel that way any longer - both of them had said it. Why then, did Ron still feel like the odd man out?

"So, Hermione?" he said, trying to fill the odd silence that fell between the three of them. "You're working on Healing Spells? Didn't the healers at St. Mungo's say your burns couldn't be fixed?"

"I know!" she snapped in a fit of frustration. "I didn't look at the spells for me – at least not initially. They were for you and Harry. For when you battle Voldemort. Look, when the Death Eaters attacked, they knew what they were doing. The front lines hit hard and often, they didn't divide up like they did at the Ministry that time back in fifth year. In Bulgaria there were two Death Eaters who hung back and cast Healing Spells, so that the attackers were in constant top form. And so, I thought, if I knew some Healing Spells, I could be of more use to the two of you while you're fighting, and match them Healing for Healing."

"That's bloody brilliant!" Ron exclaimed. She blushed and tried to hide a smile.

"That's standard Auror figuration." Ron turned to see Tonks standing in the doorway, little Jack bundled up in her arms. "Ron, Harry, put on your shirts."

Ron turned and grabbed his from the foot of the bed, and pulled it over his head. Harry, on the other hand, just stood there looking self-conscious as Hermione already wore his.

"You told Harry you can ID some of the Death Eaters who attacked you," Tonks said to Hermione. "Think you could come down to the Ministry and look through some personnel parchments?"

"You think...you think the Death Eaters who attacked us were Aurors?" Hermione asked, stunned at the idea.

"Maybe one, or maybe none. I'm hoping for none, but you never know these days." Tonks turned to Ron. "Take him. It's a full moon tonight, and I've got to go." She kissed the top of her son's head, and then handed him off. And while she did this she whispered in Ron's ear, "Take good care of him, will you?" Then she eyed Harry and Hermione, and added a quick, "And no funny business."

Ron nodded yes, but she was already out the door. Jack fussed a little and Ron pulled him closer to his chest.

"She just leaves like that?" Hermione asked. "Without telling you where she's going or when she'll be back, or what to feed him or anything?"

"She's not allowed to say when it's Ministry work. Aurors are all very hush-hush," Ron explained, now feeling an expert. "And she probably doesn't know when she'll be back. Sometimes when they're trying to apprehend a wizard it can take all night. Don't worry. I know what to do for him."

"It would be terrible if we had Aurors doubling as Death Eaters," Harry said.

"Bloody terrible," Ron agreed.

"Well, we know there are Order Aurors, so it follows that there might be some doubling for the other side, as well," Hermione reasoned. "I can't imagine that the good guys would have a monopoly on double agents."

"That should be first on our list of things to do – sniff out the Death Eaters in the Ministry. Since you're going to be there tomorrow to get your Apparation license, it should be easy for Tonks or Shacklebolt or someone to get you in to look through some employee parchments."

"I'm going to take my test," she corrected Harry, her tone was sharp. "Not necessarily get my license."

Ron shot her a grin. "Oh, don't worry, Hermione. I plan to snog the sweet from you before you go in to test. You're sure to get that license with my magic lips," Ron teased.

She raised a brow, but refrained from a retort. Harry snorted.

She quickly changed the subject. "What are you going to do with him during the lesson?" she asked, nodding to Jack.

"He'll probably sleep if I feed him something now. He's not a problem. Are you, little Jackie? No, not at all."

Hermione's eyes narrowed a little, and an idea popped into Ron's head. "Here," he said, holding out the baby for her. "Take him while I scrounge up some vita-milk."

She backed away a couple of steps. "Oh, no, that's all right."

"No, really," Ron said. "He won't bite you. There's nothing to be scared of."

"I'm not scared!" Hermione insisted. "It's just, well, Tonks gave him to you. I'm sure she wouldn't want someone else to hold him...or anything."

Ron smirked at her. "I thought you wanted a dozen."

"It doesn't really matter, as you don't want any, and I'm not likely to go running off to marry any other blokes. I'd just get them all killed, wouldn't I?"

Swaying with Jack, Ron urged: "Take him, Hermione."

She dropped her gaze and made to brush her hair back from her face, and then remembered too late that it was far too short to actually be in her way. "I – I'll drop him."

"You won't. Look, I'll show you," Ron said, encouragingly. He held Jack out to her. "Hold his head like this, and tuck your arm like this. See? He likes you. Look at how he's staring. Isn't he amazing? And look! He's going to be a metamorphmagus!" Ron pointed to Jack's tiny fisted hand, which was now a stunning turquoise. "He does that sometimes. I don't think he knows what he's doing, but it's fun to see what he'll come up with. I was changing his diaper once and he was all green and purple polka dotted down there. Gave me a fright, I can tell you!"

Jack began to fuss a little, and Ron helped Hermione shift him closer to her, so she held him against her chest. "If you pat his bottom, he like that just fine," Ron told her.

She made a face. "Yeah, I've heard that one before," she quipped.

Harry snorted a laugh.

"OK, then," Ron said. "I'll just nip down and get him something to eat." Hermione gave him a please-don't-go look, but didn't say anything when he did.

Ron had to stay at the manse that night as Jack wasn't big enough to Apparate with him or use the Floo Network. Tonks and Lupin transported him via broom, but Ron didn't have his with him and he didn't see the point in borrowing Harry's when there was a perfectly good - not to mention large - bed waiting there at number 12 for him.

After the lesson, all three of them were exhausted, and they lounged on the comfortable, over-stuffed couches in the parlor, while Jack slept away in the drawer Ron had pulled out of the empty chest in his room and turned into a bassinet. He really was a sweet baby.

"Another butter beer?" Harry asked, holding up his empty.

Ron shook his head, and Hermione said through a yawn, "I think not." She was wrapped in a thick dressing gown, pajamas, and heavy, wooly socks. It was unreal how she could even look beautiful when she was dressed like his aunt Edna.

"Ron?" she said, startling him from his reverie. He blinked at her. "So? What do you think?"

Ron hadn't the foggiest what the conversation had been about, but odds were she was spouting some plan or other she'd come up with. "I think you're brilliant," he said, and found himself grinning. Lupin would like that one, wouldn't he? A compliment to make Hermione happy. Was that how he adored her?

"And that's enough of that," she said, taking his nearly empty bottle of butterbeer from him. "You have the tolerance of a house elf."

"It really all hinges on Madame Pomphrey, doesn't it?" Harry said, ignoring their exchange. "If she's willing to apprentice you or not."

"Yes, but I'd be living at Hogwarts, at least for the foreseeable future."

This got Ron's attention, and he sat up straighter. "What?"

"Isn't that a good thing?" Harry asked. "I mean, of the three of us you certainly miss Hogwarts the most. And Ginny's there, so you'd have a friend. Actually, several, if you count Neville and Luna and the rest of them. All our old friends are there."

"Wait a minute—" Ron said but was cut off.

"I just feel weird, you know, going back without you two." She gave Ron an odd look then. "But, maybe..." she said, turning to stare down the neck of her own drink.

"Maybe what?" Ron challenged.

"Nothing," she said.

"Hermione," he said sternly, "if you want me to say something, then you best tell me what it is, because I'm not an Occlumens."

"Is that ever true!" she snapped.

"Why are you angry at me?" Ron asked, feeling his own ire grow.

Hermione glared at him. "You probably want me to go, don't you? Get me out of your hair."

"No I wouldn't," he said sheepishly, and then added: "I don't have any hair."

This made Harry guffaw, which upset Hermione even more. "You're a prat, Ron Weasley."

"Oh, come on! I was only teasing," Ron told her. "And no, I don't want you to go. I'd hardly ever see you. It's bad enough living back at the Burrow. I'd much rather be here with the two of you."

"That's a brilliant idea!" Harry said, jumping up. "Move back in! We can get your things in the morning!"

"Like Mum would allow that," Ron said with an amused snort. "She's still all wiggy about you and Ginny. There's no way—"

"Ron," Harry said, and incredulous look on his face. "Don't you know what tomorrow is?"

Ron's brows rose. "Tomorrow?"

"It's your birthday, daftie. Your eighteenth birthday. Your mum might not be thrilled with it, but what can she do? And, anyway, it's not like the two of you would be sharing a room. Would you?" The new thought left an uncertain look on Harry's face. "I mean...has anything happened...between you...that maybe I should know about?"

Both Hermione and Ron just stared at him.

"Huh," Harry said. "Well, anyway, what can she do?"

"Is tomorrow really my birthday?" Ron asked. How had it snuck up on him like that? Years past he'd spent months counting down the days, giddy over the thought of gifts and all his favorite foods served up by the house elves at Hogwarts.

Hermione smiled at him; a disbelieving and amused smile. "You're a funny boy, you know that Ron?"

"Ah," he said. "But tomorrow even in the Muggle world, I'm a man." Jack was up half the night screeching. Ron tried feeding him, changing him, swaddling him, burping him, and even the bottom pat he was so fond of. Nothing worked, and Ron ended up pacing in the dining room with the bundled of baby most of the night. When Jack finally wore himself out, Harry was down making coffee and Hermione was sitting at the table with half of her hair sticking straight up. Moody relaxed at the table as well, with his metal foot off, and a slice of buttered bread in one hand. He already had a pot of tea in front of him, so Ron figured he'd been there for a while.

Ron sat the drawer with Jack finally slumbering away on the table and collapsed down opposite Hermione.

"You look like death," she said.

"Yeah, nice hair," he told her, and her hand shot to her head.

"Lad keep you awake?" Moody asked. He chuckled quietly when Ron nodded. "Ah, fatherhood."

"Haven't seen Tonks, have you?" Ron asked, wishing her there. He wouldn't be able to go with Hermione to the Ministry unless she showed up soon. On second thought, he could sneak in a couple of hours sleep if he stayed behind.

Harry put a big mug of coffee in front of him, and Ron dived in.

"I'd best get dressed," Hermione said, and headed out. Harry took her seat.

"Happy birthday," he said to Ron over the table, and then produced a small box wrapped in green and blue. "We've decided against a party after what happened the last time, but your mum is coming over tonight to make your birthday dinner. And I think Ginny may stop by."

"Another Grief Leave Pass from Hogwarts?" Ron asked with a knowing smile.

"Hey! It's all for you, mate!" Harry insisted, through a smile of his own.

The package was about the size of Ron's hand, and it was pretty obvious that Harry didn't do the wrapping. Ron loved gifts, and he tried to size up how best to open this new little beauty. He untied the ribbon and tore the paper off. Inside was a single seed, about the size of a pumpkin seed, only bright red with yellow, jagged stripes. "Wow," said Ron. "Uh...thanks."

He picked up the seed between his thumb and forefinger and examined it. "What the bloody hell is it?"

"It's a nonesuch seed. They grow on a small bush along the Nonesuch River. They're rare, so I could only find one – but if you use it properly, you'll only need one." Ron eyed his friend with a dubious expression. Harry continued. "You swallow it with a full glass of water about an hour before you want to say no wrong. It only lasts for an hour, so you have to time it out, but for that hour no matter what situation you find yourself in – or who you find yourself with – you will say exactly the right thing."

There was a thought. An hour of not messing things up with Hermione. "That's wicked brilliant of you! Thanks, mate!"

Harry seemed delighted at Ron's enthusiasm. "Neville turned me on to it, actually. That bloke really knows his plants."

Ron carefully put the seed back in the box, and then retied the ribbon around it for safe keeping. "Wonder when I'll use it. You reckon I should save it for an emergency? Like when she asks me how she looks in something?"

"Remember the hour lead time. The nonesuch is something you have to plan for."

"Right," said Ron. "Thanks."

Moody, who had quietly observed this exchange, just sipped his tea.

"What?" Ron asked him. It was obvious the wizard had something to say, though if he wasn't saying it Ron thought belatedly that he should probably leave well enough alone.

Moody shook his head. "It'd be a waste of breath," he muttered.

Hermione came in then, in fresh robes and her hair somewhat tamed. "All right, then," she said, and Moody stood. Ron got up, too, and went to her.

"Ready for that kiss?" he asked through a playful leer.

"Oh, Ron," she admonished, and then gasped when he grabbed her around the waist with one arm and pulled her against him. He slowly lowered his lips to hers, and kissed her ever-so gently. And then, with the next kiss he opened his mouth just a little and closed it over her bottom lip. She gave another little gasp, which he took for encouragement, and sucked harder. His tongue ventured into the hot moistness of her mouth, and with a little coaxing, found hers. This time she groaned and when he pulled her in tighter she pushed him away.

Breathless, she asked, "What are you doing?"

"Extra special luck," he said grinning. His whole body tingled, and it felt so bloody good.

"No," she said, and pushed herself out of his arms. "No, I'm not ready for this."

That surprised him. "Uh...OK," he said, stepping back another few paces. "Really?" It had felt so very right to him – how could she not have felt that? And hadn't they already kissed in the cabinet? He'd kissed someone, that was for sure!

"It's only been a week," she said quietly, almost a whisper, and Ron remembered then that they weren't the only people in the room. "I'm still...mourning, I guess. It's wrong to be kissing you like that when he's dead."

And by he, she meant Viktor. The tingles inside turned to ice, and sank down to the base of his stomach. "Oh. Right," he said. And then, "Did you love him?" popped out of his mouth. Her eyes shot up to his, unreadable. Without even thinking about it he added, "As much as you love me?" This earned him another, equally indecipherable expression before she looked away.

"I can't explain this to you now," she said. Then she seemed to reach a decision, stood on her tip-toes, and kissed his cheek. "Ready?" she said to Moody, who nodded. The two of them left leaving Ron staring like an idiot with his hand to his face. Harry sighed deeply behind him.

"Yeah," Harry muttered, "I should've gotten you a lifetime supply of nonesuch seeds."

Ron was stuck at the manse that day with Jack as Lupin was surely recovering from his full-moon ordeal of the night before, and Tonks hadn't yet returned from her Ministry excursion. When Hermione didn't make it back by lunch time Ron began to worry that she'd failed the test. He berated himself for pushing too hard with the kiss that morning; if she failed it was surely his fault.

Jack slept most of the day, and so Ron got a five hour nap in (between bouts of guilt), and even had time to do a few practice exercises that Lupin had given him. Ron didn't understand how his feelings for Hermione worked with his magic, but he had definitely improved by leaps and bounds since her return, and for the first time in his life Ron found himself enjoying homework. It was brilliant to be reasonably good at something. He had a sneaking suspicion that this was what it felt like to be Hermione. It was a little scary.

His mum showed up mid-afternoon with pots and casseroles and a box that smelled of sugar cake. "Happy birthday, dear," she said and greeted him with a kiss on the cheek and a pat on the head. "Have a good day?"

"Splendid," he told her. "I slept."

"Ah, that's good." She went to work at once, and Ron decided it was time to wake Jack for his bottle. He settled at the table to feed him, and watched his mother work.

"So, tell me, how are things?" she asked after a while. "Are the lessons going better?"

Were they ever! Ron blushed a bit, but concentrated on Jack. He had a little sleep in his eye, and Ron carefully picked it out. "Yeah, better all around. Harry and I are finally making some headway."

"Good, good," she said lightly, though he could see her knowing smile. "And at the shop? I see you're not working today."

"The shop?" Ron hadn't even thought of it that day. "Yeah, well, I've got Jack, haven't I?"

"You, do," his mother said, though he couldn't tell if she was actually agreeing with him or not. "I got an owl from Ginny," she said by way of changing the subject. "I don't think I've ever heard her so happy. She's thinking of becoming an Auror now, you know. Luckily she had all the required O.W.L.S. already, and only had to shift two classes. McGonagall feels she's a natural." There was pride in his mum's

voice – unmistakable pride – and still worry. She was forever fretting about them all.

"How are you, Mum?"

She froze for a moment, and then turned to him. "I don't think you've ever asked me that before." From out of no where her eyes got moist and sad. "You're surely growing up, aren't you? Seeing the world outside yourself now? Taking care of a little baby. It's enough to make a mother weep with pride. You're becoming your father's son, Ron. I hope you know how very wonderful that is."

Ron's face went hot all over again, and he tried to hide his self-conscious smile. "Thanks, Mum. But you've changed the subject, haven't you?"

"I'd hoped you wouldn't notice that. A few months ago you wouldn't have," she said, and then turned back to her stirring.

"A lot has happened in the past few months," he told her.

"That it has," she agreed, and then left the stove to sit by him. She touched Jack's head, and smiled despondently. "I miss your father," she said at last. "Terribly. And it's...very hard to miss him so much. It's harder than I thought it could be."

Ron began to panic a little. He'd no idea what to say to his mother that would help her, reassure her. He didn't even know if that's what she wanted. Why had he asked that stupid question? "I should've gone home last night," he said by way of apology, hoping that might help. "I just...well, with Jack—"

"No, no," she said, and waved a dismissing hand. "You've new responsibilities, and I've got to learn to be by myself. And besides, you're eighteen today. You don't need your ol' mum anymore. I expect you'll be wanting to move back into your flat soon."

"Uh...funny you should mention that," he said, sheepishly.

She gave him a smile. "That's my lad. All right, enough of this. You do what you need to do, and don't worry about me. Wives lose their husbands, and husbands lose their wives. I'm no different, I reckon. I've just got to figure out how they manage."

She went back to her cooking, and Ron continued to watch her for a while.

Supper was just about ready when Hermione finally Apparated home with Moody and Harry in tow. She was positively beaming and she waved the red folded card at Ron. "I got it!" she told him, and then she showed his mum. Harry was all smiles, too.

"That's great!" Ron told her, both thrilled for her and relieved for them all. She brought the license over to Ron to see, even though his was identical save for the name.

"Alastor?" Ron's mum said. "You'll be staying for supper, yes? I've cooked up roast beef with all the trimmings."

"Ah," he said. "Music to my gut! Don't mind if I do, at that." He took a seat at the table just as Lupin walked in. Well, shuffled.

"There you are," he said with exhausted relief to Jack, who was kicking his little legs about in his drawer bassinet. "You are a sight for sore eyes, laddie."

His eyes might be sore, but the rest of him looked ravished. He was covered in new bruises and deep cuts that had been hastily taped back together. His clothes may have been changed, but the fresh ones were shabby enough that he looked the part of a vagrant having the worst day of his life.

"Bad time of it, Remus?" Ron's mum asked. The rest of them had been momentarily stunned into silence. She placed a hot cup of tea and a wedge of lemon down in front of him. "Let me tend those wounds for you."

"Don't bother," he told her. "Tonks will give me a once over when we get home."

"It's no bother," she insisted, and pulled out her wand.

"Actually," Hermione said, stopping her. "Would you mind if I give it a go? I've been working on a few Healing Spells, but haven't had much in the way of practice."

"Be my guest," he said, and then sipped his tea.

Hermione's first few attempts with her whippy wand had only minimal results. She glared at the wand, and Ron could see her frustration hadn't diminished in the week she'd had it. But with a little suggestion from Ron's mum, and a smile of encouragement from Ron, she managed several decent Suture Charms, a Pain Charm, and an Antibacterium to prevent infections. Once again, Ron was amazed by what she'd been able to teach herself.

Supper was particularly good that night, and Ron ate three plates full of meat and gravy, potatoes, wovay with cheese, and fresh baked bread with butter. Butterbeers and Zonko's were the drink of choice, and Harry laughed as Ron opened his fourth.

They were just about to clear the table when there was a slam of the front door upstairs, and Moody, Lupin and Harry all jumped to their feet, wands drawn. Kingsley Shacklebolt limped in a moment later, bloody and filthy and looking half dead. He surveyed the room slowly, and then went straight to Lupin.

"Oh, dear magic, no," Lupin whispered to himself.

Kingsley could barely speak. Even from where Ron stood he could smell the blood and sweat on him, the charred flesh. His face had a deep gash down the center of it that severed his lips, and another on his neck that was still actively bleeding. "We were ambushed. It was a trap," he croaked out. "I did everything I could. She...went down fighting." He extended his hand, and held out Tonks' bloody wand to Lupin.

He just stared at it. "Where...where is she? Did you leave her?"

Shacklebolt swallowed with some difficulty, and then closed his eyes. He reached in his cloak and produced a scarf wrapped around something the size of a shoe. "This was all that was left," he told Lupin. The scarf was bright pink, but now it was dark, almost black in places where the blood soaked through.

"No," said Lupin, though there was no voice behind it. He threw back his head and bellowed a horrible howl. His face twisted in absolute agony. It terrified Ron, and he grabbed a wailing Jack up and held him close.

"Everyone out!" Harry yelled, though there was little, if any, reason to. It was plain what was going to happen. Lupin's anguished howls became less and less human as his body began to transform. Harry and Hermione helped Shacklebolt up the stairs, and Hermione locked the door once they were all clear with a swish of her wand.

"Will it hold?" Ron asked.

"The spell will," she confidently told him. "I'm not so sure about the door."

"He's usually in chains," Harry said. "But that's more for his protection, isn't it?"

They gathered at the top of the stairs, all staring wide-eyed and worried.

Ron's mum broke first. "Oh, Tonks," she said and her eyes began to stream.

"We need to get Shacklebolt to St. Mungo's," Harry said. It was at that moment that Shacklebolt's leg gave out, and he toppled to one side. Harry and Hermione managed to catch him. "We've got to get him outside so we can Apparate. Hermione, can you Levitate him?"

She whipped out her wand again, and easily got the injured man out the door. Ron's mum and Harry went with Shacklebolt to hospital, but Hermione insisted on staying with Ron. It was brave of her, Ron

thought, with the crashes and roars that were coming from the basement. Lupin was destroying the whole room.

The baby was still screaming in his arms, and he startled at every sound. Ron hurried up the stairs, but Hermione called out to him.

"Ron, we can't stay here!"

"Where, then?"

"Anywhere! If Lupin manages to break down that door—"

"I know," Ron insisted. "But where do we go with Jack? He can't Apparate or go by floo for another couple of months—"

"Broom! Where's Harry's broom?"

"In his room, I think—" Another terrible blast of destruction came from the kitchen, followed by a howl that sent tremors up Ron's spine. He bolted up the stairs, and down the hall to Harry's room, and threw open the door. The broom leaned against the night stand, but Ron's eyes went to the blanket folded neatly at the foot of Harry's bed. He grabbed it and wrapped it around himself and the baby, and turned to Hermione who had just come in behind him. "Tie the ends together," he told her. "Tight." She secured the blanket so that the squirming baby was held firmly in place against Ron's chest, and completely covered against the cold air and weather outside.

"The Burrow," Hermione said. "I'll Apparate there."

"But you'll be alone and in the open," Ron protested.

"Not for long. I'll hurry into the house as soon as I get there."

"Hermione, come with us on the broom."

"I'll be fine. You fly safely." She kissed him on the cheek, which surprised him, and in his moment of hesitation, she kissed his lips. "I'll wait for you."

"Uh..." he grunted, temporarily struck dumb. The sound of a heavy body thrown against the kitchen door startled him out of his reverie, and Ron whirled around to grab the broom. Then, the three of them scrambled down the stairs as fast as they could take them, and then out into the night. Hermione stopped to lock the front door, but Ron doubted it would make much of a difference. He hoped Lupin would be all right, or little Jack would have no one. He looked down at the lump attached to his front.

"Oh," he breathed.

"What?" Hermione demanded, on edge.

"Tonks," Ron said.

"Yes, but not now, Ron. Once we're safe."

She was forever practical. Odd as it was with everything that had happened, this made him smile. "It's good to have you back," he told her.

"See you in a few." With a CRACK that echoed down the street, she vanished.

Ron took a deep breath, swung his leg over the broom handle, wrapped an arm tightly around Jack, and kicked off.

He didn't know what to expect of his flight to the Burrow. He'd never flown that far before, and never with a passenger. Jack quieted down almost instantly, and at first this worried Ron. But the baby continued to respond to the tiny pinches Ron gave his legs, so he decided little Jack was just enjoying the ride, and he focused on his flying. He repeatedly glanced around. There didn't appear to be anyone following him, which was a relief, because he honestly didn't know what he would do if there were. As it was night, navigation was quite a problem. He wasn't completely familiar with the landmarks between London and Devon during the day, so the darkness interspersed with dots of yellow and white lights weren't much help. Why hadn't this particular problem occurred to him before he left the manse?

Ron tried to stay low enough to keep from the freezing air, but even at ground level the weather was chilly and damp. Once they were out of London, and there was mostly blackness as far as the eye could see, the air turned decidedly colder. Luckily there were ample stars out, and Ron quickly called on his astronomy classes to find the North Star, and then turn to the west. Below him was a Muggle roadway, lit by both automobiles and a sprinkling of street lamps every so often. The road seemed to vaguely go in the direction of home, so he kept it in his sight.

Broom travel was slow, and there was a lot of time to think while he was aloft. And with the little baby strapped to his front, it was impossible not to think of his mother; how alive and young she'd been, how full of fun and humor. It was difficult to believe he'd never see her again. A familiar sensation opened in his gut: grief and loss. It wasn't the same he'd experienced – well, still experienced from time to time – over his father's death. But it hurt, and he cried, even though he thought that a man shouldn't cry, not when he had someone so tiny and vulnerable counting on him. Ron was eighteen. She'd been murdered on his birthday.

After near on an hour, though, Ron hit another large glob of lights, and then a vast dark nothingness beyond, which couldn't be fields he reckoned, and Ron thought he smelled a hint of salt water in the air. He'd gone too far west, he'd decided. Or, more likely, he was simply too far north. Ottery St. Catchpole was close to the English Channel, but that couldn't be the body of water in front of him. Not unless someone had changed the location of the North Star.

Ron turned left, and headed south. It was another hour before he came up on another vast darkness of water, and this, he decided, was the Channel. So, the choice was: left or right? East or West. He tried to picture a map of England in his head, and all he managed was an image of Hermione rolling her eyes asking if he learned anything at all while at Hogwarts. "Left," he decided. Not twenty minutes later he came upon another mass of lights, and knew it couldn't be Exeter, which was what he was hoping for. Exeter wasn't quite as close to the channel as this city was. The baby began to fuss as Ron turned completely around and headed West once more.

Serious doubt began to plague Ron, and he considered turning around again when the lights and formations below began to look somewhat familiar. If that was Exeter...then that, he told himself, that is Honiton. And if that was Honiton, then that was the Ottery. And if that was the Ottery, then that was the Burrow. Relief warmed him, and ten minutes later he began his decent.

The landing was rough. In the time he'd been aloft his legs had forgotten how heavy he was. But he didn't fall, just stumbled a couple of steps, and then Ron trotted up the pathway toward the house. The amber stones lining the walk lit warmly as he passed them. The moment he opened the door Hermione threw herself at him. Jack protested, but Ron didn't. She kissed him on the lips, the cheek, the nose – everywhere she could reach.

"Where the bloody hell have you been? I've been here for ages, and I was so very worried!" She smacked his arm quite hard. "Blast it, Ron! I thought something terrible had happened!"

"I got lost," he explained. "The whole bloody world looks the same at night. You should've come with me."

"Yes, well, we know that now, don't we? How's Jack doing?"

At that particular moment Jack was screaming his lungs out. Hermione helped untie them, and Ron cradled the baby in his arms.

"Maybe he needs fresh nappies?" Hermione suggested.

"He's hungry," Ron told her. "That's his give-me-food cry. The thing is, I don't think there's any vita-milk here."

"Can you feed him anything else?"

"Uh...I dunno. Haven't really had to."

"Well...are there any books on babies here?" she asked, glancing around as if Ron's mum kept baby instruction manuals just lying around.

"I doubt my mum needs books on babies. She's a professional by now."

Little Jack was turning purple – literally – in his indignity of being hungry. "OK, OK," Ron told him. "Let's see what mum's got in here." In the cold cupboard there was a pitcher of water, butter, various meats and cheeses, but no vita-milk.

"Can we try water?" Hermione asked. "And do we have a bottle?"

"Uh..." Ron glanced around the kitchen, but he already knew the answer. Then a realization hit him, and he turned to Hermione. "Hey, you're a girl. You can feed him."

"I...what?" she asked, apparently completely baffled by his statement.

"It's all right. Tonks breastfeeds him all the time. She said he took to the nipple like a dog to a bone."

Hermione's expression went funny for a moment, and then she burst out laughing. "You can't be serious."

"Come on," Ron urged. "I won't look if that bothers you, but this little lad needs to eat."

"Ron, I can't—"

"Sure you can," he encouraged. "No one will mind. And we'll get some vita-milk when the others come back."

"No, Ron," she said sternly. "I physically can't. Not that I would, but I can't. Women's breasts don't work like that. There's no on/off switch."

"No what? Look, I know you've got, you know, them. I can see them, for Merlin's sake!"

"But they're not – functional!" She made a frustrated, disgusted sound. "Ron, it's not going to happen, so let's think of something else, shall we?"

"Fine, then," he said peevishly. "What do you suggest?"

"Well...I don't know..." She began to rummage through the cabinets again. "Maybe we could conjure up some vita-milk? In a bottle already?"

Ron snorted. "Great. And you happen to know that spell?"

"Well, I don't know!"

This made Jack scream even louder. "Look, I'm going to change his nappies," Ron told her. "And when I come back, either you've figured something out or you're offering up a boob!" He left her glaring at him.

There were, of course, no nappies upstairs, either. Ron found an old towel in the bathroom - which wasn't difficult as they were almost all very old, and many of them were threadbare. He got some spell-o-tape from his room, and a warm jumper to wrap the baby in.

When he got back downstairs Hermione had concocted a bottle out of a plastic bag and filled it with sugar water. "It's not nutritious, of course," she explained, "but it'll fill his stomach for tonight. And we can get him some real food in the morning." The bag didn't work well, either, and most of the sugar water ended up on Jack's front. But he got enough in, Ron supposed, because he stopped fussing and drifted off to sleep again while Hermione was holding him on her lap.

"I can't believe he'll never know his mother," she whispered to Ron. "He'll never know how wonderful she was. And she'll never hear his first words, or see him catch his first Snitch. His whole life is ahead of him, and hers is over." Her eyes watered. "Tonks, Viktor and his family, your father. It's so horrible, Ron. I must be the most selfish person in the world. Because as much as I miss them, as much as I see your mother grieving, or Lupin, or the few who remained in Viktor's family, I find myself thanking the stars that it wasn't you." She looked up at him, pained and sad.

Ron had to touch her, to reassure them both, and he rested his hand on her arm. But it wasn't enough. They both jumped up together, and fiercely embraced. Jack, stuck between them, let out piercing wail at

suddenly being sandwiched between the two of them. When they pulled apart, Hermione's face was red and crumpled, and now the tears fell freely. Seeing her like that made Ron's own eyes stream. He brushed the moisture away with his sleeve.

They went into the den, where Hermione made a bed for the baby on a chair, and swaddled him with a throw. Ron showed her how he liked his little arms tucked in. Standing so close to her, feeling as horrible as he did, knowing that Tonks was gone, it was too much. He pulled her to him, and kissed her slowly, intently. Her hand crept up to cradle his face, and she deepened the kiss. Her tongue found his and a groan escaped both their throats. She tasted salty from her tears, and sweet...just because she was.

Her hands dropped down around his middle, and began to smooth over his ribs and sides. The way she touched him – it took his breath away, and he found himself gasping in between wet kisses. He tried to touch her as well, but he had trouble focusing on the kissing, what she was doing to him, and making his hands work at the same time. Brain function had long-since stopped as all the blood on his body was rushing either to his lips, or his groin. She reached under his shirt, and his whole body lurched. He had to pull back a little, and he watched as a wicked smile spread across her swollen lips. She knew she knew what she was doing to him. That turned him on even more.

Somehow he ended up holding her hips against him, but now he wanted to make her feel a little of what was coursing through his veins. He skimmed his hands up her sides, and was gratified as her eyes grew wider. They weren't kissing now – Ron was too caught up in the way she felt beneath his fingers. The way her body curved under his palms. He cupped her breasts through her shirt and jumper. He squeezed.

She pulled away, and stepped out of his reach, turned her back on him. She crossed her arms tightly over her chest. The heat within him turned to ice as adrenaline shot through him. He began to panic. Had he gone too far? Surely not! Hadn't she gone all the way with two men already? Was it him?

"You...don't like the way I touch you?" he asked, surprised to hear how breathless his voice was. He ran a hand over his head. He could do better. He could...read a book or something.

"Yes, of course I do," she snapped at him. Jack was startled by her reaction and began to cry. With a heavy sigh and a shake of her head she went over and picked the baby up. Ron took that opportunity to adjust himself in his jeans. Instead of comforting Jack, though, she handed him off to Ron.

"What's going on with you? I thought – I thought you wanted to...?"

She just shook her head and dropped heavily into the low chair. "I wonder how Shacklebolt is doing."

Ron had momentarily forgotten about him, and Tonks, and it made him feel terrible all over again. He bounced Jack a little, and then sat on the couch to pat his back. Jack quiet down fairly quickly, and Ron's brain kept replaying the previous five minutes. Five minute of bliss gone in an instant. He ventured a look at her. She had her eyes closed.

"I shouldn't have touched you like that," he said. "It was...ungentlemanly. I'm sorry."

"Oh, Ron." She sighed and dropped her face into her hands. "I don't want to talk about this now."

"Well, I need to," he told her. "I don't understand what just happened between us."

She smirked. "You've never understood much of anything between us."

"I don't want things to be like they were. Do you?"

"Well, no," she said after very little consideration.

"Look, we're Fated, yes, but there's more to it than that. Whatever else is between us we've always been best mates. There shouldn't be anything you can't tell me."

"You said you hated me," she accused, which shocked Ron into silence again. He had said that. And, at the time, he'd thought it true. Now he knew it couldn't have been.

He cleared his throat. "I know I did. I thought I did. But...I was wrong. Apparently I've never hated anyone in my life, or so Harry says. I was just very angry. And hurt. I wish I hadn't said that."

She eyed him suspiciously, not wanting to take his words at face value, and so Ron explained about his Smisurato abilities, and the energy link with Harry and how it sometimes channeled emotions as well. "I'm getting much better at sending through pure energy," he assured her, worried about the look of horror on her face.

"So...the next time you and Harry link up, he's not going to know about...what just happened, is he?"

"Uh...no."

"I mean, it's just, well, I'd rather keep what's between you and me private. Especially since he and me, well, you know. It's no body's business what we do, or how we feel. I just...I don't want to share this with him. Any of it. I don't...want to share you with anyone."

"I completely agree," Ron said. A first for those three particular words, he reckoned. They smiled at each other, and Ron felt like the moment was ripe.

He stood, and gently placed the sleeping Jack on the couch, and then kneeled in front of Hermione in the low chair. She looked a little worried when he reached to her and pulled her by the front of her shirt closer. He kissed her with slow, gentle movements and didn't allow her to deepen the kiss. Instead, starting with his hands on her knees, he smoothed his palms up the length of her thighs. There was a catch in her breath when he reached her hips, but she didn't stop him, and he continued unhurriedly up her belly and ribs. He could feel

her rapid breaths, and muscles that jumped as he touched them. Ron stopped when each of her breasts filled the curve between his thumb and forefinger.

"Now tell me," he whispered, intently watching her expression. "What did I do wrong?" He slipped his hands up a little and cupped her fullness. "Was it this?" He squeezed a little. "Or this?"

"No," she whispered back, breathless. Her mouth hung open just the smallest amount, and it was all Ron could do to keep himself from claiming it.

"Then tell me," he asked. His left thumb smoothed over her hard nipple. She closed her eyes.

"I'm scarred. Right there," she said. "All over, I'm scarred."

"I know," he told her. "I've seen. Do they hurt still? Am I hurting you?" This new thought bothered him and he pulled his hands away, only to have her grip his wrists and bring his fingers back to her breasts. She didn't look at him, didn't say a word.

Ron sat back on his heels. "You're worried because of the scars? Hermione, I'm scarred," he told her and lifted his shirt.

She reached out and touched the fist-sized pink patch on his chest.

Her brows rose together and tears flooded her eyes. "How can I feel so much...for you...?" She shook her head, pulled her hand back. "Of course I feel strongly for you, that's not what I..."

"Then what is it?" he prompted. She just shook her head again.

She was upset, and he didn't know how to help. He wanted to touch her, needed to hold her. He pulled her down to him, and she went willingly. She straddled his bent legs and her body came to rest against his. She was taller than him now, sitting in his lap, and she ran her hands over his fuzzy head. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

Her kisses were moody now, and full of pain, though each caress of her lips against his was like a butterfly's touch. When she tried to deepen the kiss now, he welcomed her tongue and teeth, her hands roaming under the back of his shirt, the pressure of her body in his lap. He touched her, as well, and reveled in the warmth of her skin, even the rough bit at the base of her spine. Spurred on by her excitement he worked his fingers down inside the back of her jean, inside her knickers, and cupped the soft roundness there. She gasped, breaking their kisses, and pressed her forehead against his shoulder.

"Do you want me to stop?" he asked.

"Do you?" she countered. There was fire in her gaze, and she rocked her pelvis against him before attacking his mouth with hers once more.

Ron couldn't keep up with the bolts of excitement shooting through him, and he felt a pressure begin to build deep within him. He knew what it was, even though he'd never gotten this far with a girl before. It scared him a little. He didn't want to top-off in his pants.

"Wait," he said, pulling away from her kisses, breathless and sweating. "Too much."

"You're right," she said in between bites on the side of his neck. "We can't tonight. Not when Tonks...when Viktor..."

"Viktor?" Ron jumped up, shocked by that name on her lips. She slipped unceremoniously to the floor.

The name was enough to quell both their passions, and they sat still and panting for a moment to regain their composure. When Hermione made it to her feet, she froze, and Ron turned to see his mum and Ginny storm into the house.

"Oh, thank the stars!" Ron's mum exclaimed. "We didn't know if you two would have the sense to come here or..." She trailed off as she came to realize what she was seeing; their swollen lips, shortness of breath – the front of his jeans. Heat shot up from his chest and

engulfed his neck and face, and he hobbled around so his front was hidden from his mother. Hermione righted her top.

"How is Shacklebolt?" Hermione asked right away.

Ginny spoke up, and when she did the smirk from a moment ago faded. "Fell into a coma the minute we got him to hospital. He's in a bad way, they say, and they don't know what to expect. We stayed until they had him stabilized."

"But, where's Harry?" Hermione asked.

"Well, we weren't sure if you'd still be back at Headquarters or not, so he and Moody went to check on you two, and Remus," Ron's mum said. "Poor, dear Remus." She shook her head, and brushed a few tears from her cheek. "I'm happy the both of you thought to come here." She smiled at Hermione when she said this, figuring rightly, Ron realized, that it had been Hermione's impetus that brought them to the Burrow.

"So, Moody went with him, then? Harry's not alone?"

"No, dear, why?"

"Lupin went scary just before we left. That's why we came here," Ron explained.

"We were worried he might hurt himself, but we didn't know what to do," Hermione added. "He was in a terrible state. I'm not sure the house will stand much of a chance against him."

"Poor, dear Remus," Ron's mum said again, and more tears followed. She collapsed on to the bench at the kitchen table, and dropped her head into the cradle of her crossed arms and wept. Ginny exchanged worried looks with Hermione, who said something about making some tea. The two girls hurried to the stove and spoke together in hushed tones. Ron was left feeling useless and out of place. Which wasn't entirely unusual for him – it had just been a while.

He took a seat next to his mother, and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. When she snaked a hand up to his, he laid his head on her shoulder. "I know, Mum," he whispered. "I miss him, too."

It was near midnight when Harry finally limped into the Burrow cradling his right side. He told them that Lupin was safe now, that he and Moody had managed to trap him in the war room, but not before he'd done some serious damage to himself and the house. And some minor damage to Harry's ribs.

"War room?" Hermione asked, apparently not impressed by a few cracked ribs.

"Uh, yeah. I put it in when we all moved to number 12 last summer and I had the archimagitect come 'round. Thought it might come in handy."

"If there's a war room, then why have we been taking lessons in the dining room?" Ron asked, indignant. "Where the blood hell is it?"

"It's not that kind of room. And it's behind the cupboard on the second landing."

"Harry? What kind of room is it?" Ginny asked.

Harry got a little twitchy. Ron could see him try to come up with an answer that would satisfy their questions without giving too much away. Odd, that he would have that kind of secret. Ron studied him and wondered what else he was keeping from them.

"Come on, Harry. It's us. Tell us what you're up to," Hermione pressed.

He looked from Hermione and Ron to Ginny, and then to Ron's mum. All of them looked expectantly at him. "It's an impenetrable room. It's a room of last resort. No one can get in, and no one can get out."

"Well, that's can't be true if Lupin is in it," Hermione said tartly.

Harry gritted his teeth in irritation. It was clear he didn't want to be talking about this. "It is when the room is in lock down, which it is now. And I'm the only one it will respond to. Not even someone polyjuiced to look like me will fool the room."

"But what's in it?" Ginny asked.

"Nothing," Harry told her. "It's just a safe place to go. No magic can get in or out, no one can see inside it, magically or otherwise. Technically, the room doesn't exist."

"What? But Remus!" Ron's mum cried out.

"No, no, Mrs. Weasley, he's fine. I meant that it doesn't exist to people who aren't in it."

"Harry...why didn't you tell us about the war room?" Ginny asked, quietly.

Harry winced, didn't look at her. "I just didn't want to worry you, is all. I didn't want you to think that I thought that a war room might be necessary." Then he met Ginny's determined gaze, and then her mother's. "I'm going to survive this war," he told them. "And I'm going to make bloody well sure that no one else dies because I haven't done what needs to be done."

"Harry? What does that mean?" Hermione asked.

"It means that if I'd ended this months ago Tonks and Mr. Weasley would still be alive. And Viktor," he said to Hermione. "They all died because the Death Eaters are still able to run amuck. Because Voldemort is still alive."

"But," said Hermione, exasperated, "how would you have finished this months ago? Of course if you could have you would have!"

"I was with you months ago," Harry said, not looking at her. "I allowed myself to get distracted. We left Hogwarts to find the Horcruxes this year, and destroy Voldemort. I've only managed one, and that was an

accident, more or less. I've not really focused on what needs to be done, and more than half the year is gone—"

"You're being too hard on yourself," Ginny said. "Tonks and my dad, and even Viktor – their deaths aren't your fault, Harry. You must see that, really you must."

"The Fates have given me a destiny," Harry told her. "I've been ignoring it."

"Then what do you want us to do?" Ron asked. "Because we're here to help you. You're not fighting this war alone."

Harry gave him a hard look, and then sighed. "I know you're right. Dumbeldore told me once that I had to confide in my friends. And that's everyone in this room right now."

Ron's mum sucked in a breath, and more tears filled her eyes. "Thank you, Harry," she said through a whimper. They exchanged warm smiles, and Ron rolled his eyes. Witches.

"Eye on the prize, mates. Harry, what's the game plan?"

He looked at all of them, and then sat down at the kitchen table. They all followed his lead. "Well, first thing, Ginny has to finish out the rest of this year at Hogwarts," Harry said. "Now don't argue, Ginny. You're safe there, which means I don't have to worry about the Death Eaters trying to get to you. But what's more, you'll have access to a library and can do some research for us without looking suspicious and letting people know what we're on about. Also, it would be good for you to be there for Hermione. She's going to need someone to watch her back while she's apprenticing with Madame Pomfrey."

Hermione's brows furrowed but she didn't object, at least not out loud. Had she made the decision to go, then? Or had Harry just made it for her?

Harry turned to her and gave her a sheepish sort of grin, and a slight shrug. "McGonagall said she'd be happy to assist the cause in any way possible. And I think teaching you how to keep Ron and I upright

will definitely be assisting the cause. That, of course, is up to you," he said to Hermione. "It would mean living there again, and not being...well...here." He gave Ron a guilty glance.

Hermione turned to Ron beside her, and looked into his eyes for the span of a breath. "Harry, we'll always do whatever we can to help you, you know that," she said. "And if I'm at Hogwarts then I can watch out for Ginny, too.

"Right! Thanks," Harry told them both. "And it won't be for long, so learn as much as you can from Madame Pomfrey as fast as you can – though, I don't know why I even bothered telling you that." Everyone around the table tittered a little, and Ron felt the tension lessen a little. Harry continued: "Ron and I, then, need to hone our link. But even more, we need to find the remaining Horcruxes."

"But not tonight," Ron's mum said. "Too much has happened today, and we're all far too emotional to think clearly."

They all agreed that it had been a long day, and soon headed up the stairs to their respective bedroom; Ron taking Jack up with him and Harry, and settling the baby in his drawer on the floor by his bed. It wasn't more than fifteen minutes when there came a loud thump from the stairs, and then a light tap on Ron's door. Hermione poked her head in. "Harry?"

The tattler above the door came to life. "Hermione Granger! Shame on you! You're not to be in this room! Out with you, I say! Out!"

Ron stirred and grunted, and Harry sat up. "What is it?" he asked her.

"Ginny's waiting for you," she told him and came in to sit down on his bed. "You've an hour."

"Hermione Granger is in the boy's room! On the boy's bed! Get out! Out, Hermione Granger!"

"Ron, can't you do something about that?" she asked. "I left my wand upstairs."

"Isn't that it?" Harry asked pointing to the back of Hermione's pajama bottoms. She reached back, and sure enough pulled out her wand.

"Blasted thing!" she grumbled. "So you're why I tripped. Looking to break my ankle now, are you?" Frustrated she threw the wand at the wall, and, like always it struck like a dart. She turned to Harry and snapped, "Are you going to make her wait?"

Harry gave Ron a frustrated glare before he hurried out the door.

"Hermione Granger!" cried the tattler. "You brazen hussy! Out, out this instant!"

"Shove off," she grumbled, grabbed her wand again, and whipped it at the tattler, which instantly went silent.

"How'd you do that?" Ron asked in awe. "And without speaking!"

"I'm getting better at nonverbals," she told him. "And I used Petrificus Totalus. It has different effects with magical objects than people, obviously. But I think I achieved the desired result."

"Have I told you lately that you're brilliant?"

She blushed and looked away. "So...I gave him an hour, didn't I?" She lied down on Harry's vacated bed and pulled the blankets up to her chest. "I don't know why I gave them so long. He certainly doesn't need that much time."

Ron peered over at her. Surely, she wasn't saying what he thought she was saying. "Uh...did you send him down to bag my sister again? With mum sleeping just meters away?"

"I'm sure they can be quiet," Hermione told him.

"I thought...he said that they'd decided they were too young."

She sighed. "Yes, well, Ginny's rethought that, hasn't she? Grief tends to do that, I suppose."

Ron thought back to earlier that evening when he had his hands in her knickers and his tongue down her throat. "Huh," he said. Was that an invitation? Did she want him to do something, or say something? He waited for another sign.

Time slipped away, and Ron drifted back to hospital where he was looking over Hermione, so small and hurt in the narrow, white bed. Her hair was too short, and her face as pained as he'd ever seen. It was a familiar dream now, he'd been having it for a week, and he hated going back to that hospital room every night.

Didn't want to come back, she was saying. I didn't want to come back. Ron knew he was dreaming, knew he'd been there before, but the feelings were just as strong as that moment he saw her there the first time. I didn't want to come back, but I had no way to protect myself. She was crying and hiccupping, and talking all at once. I didn't want to come back, but I had no way to protect myself, and I was too afraid to jump, and I couldn't protect myself, and I didn't want to come back and I was too afraid to jump too afraid to jump too afraid to jump...

Ron sat straight up in bed. She had said it, hadn't she? It was in his dream, yes, but she'd really said it.

"Uh...Ron?" Hermione was still in the other bed, and her voice was thick and groggy from sleep. She must've dozed, too.

Ron reached for his wand and then cast a small Lumos. "You were too afraid to jump."

She blinked against his wand light. "Eh?" She yawned behind her hand.

"In hospital you said you didn't want to come back here, but that you couldn't protect yourself and you were too afraid to jump."

"Oh," she said. Nothing more.

"No. Hermione you can't not explain that."

"I thought it was fairly self-evident."

"You tried to kill yourself."

She sighed, but didn't look at him. Instead she played with the sheet.
"I'm not suicidal, if that's what has you worried."

"You're bloody right that's what has me worried! How could you even think such a thing?"

"Oh, Ron."

For a moment he thought she might refuse to answer him, but then she surprised him by moving over in the narrow bed and patting the mattress beside her. He sat, but she pulled him down next to her, and the only way they both fit was to lie on their sides facing each other. She pulled the blanket up over the both of them. Her breath smelled of toothpaste.

"After Viktor was killed, his aunt Disapparated me away from the grove, but she had to go back for her family and so, I was left alone. Completely alone. The Death Eaters had slaughtered Viktor and his family, and I knew that it would only be a matter of time before they tracked me down, too. I don't know how to express to you how that felt except to say that I only saw three options. One was to be captured. Two was to finish myself before number one could happen. Three was to run back to the Order and beg protection."

"Three should've been your only choice," Ron told her. He wasn't touching her, but he could feel the heat coming off her legs they were so close to his.

"I swore that I wouldn't come back," she told him. "And I didn't think I was wanted. But what's more, I wasn't entirely sure that I could make it back without being followed or detected. At the time it seemed more prudent to simply remove myself from the equation. If I didn't exist I wouldn't be a liability to Harry or the Order, I couldn't be tortured, and I wouldn't get anyone else killed."

The conversation was making Ron feel a little sick. "So, you were going to jump? From what?"

"I was walking all that night, and when the sun started to come out I was on a tall train bridge that spanned a valley. I figured it would be quick. But, Ron, I couldn't do it. Not even for Harry. Not even for the Order. I was a coward! I wanted to live! I told myself I was being selfish, but still I couldn't bring myself to step off." She sniffled a little. "I thought about what Moody said that night, about trusting someone with your death. And I wondered if giving your life to protect others was in the same category. And didn't I want Harry and the Order - and you - to be safe? And I was crying and screaming, 'YES!' and still I couldn't jump. I'm a coward, Ron."

"Never," he said.

"But I am."

"No," he whispered, "You're a Gryffindor." He reached up to her face. He felt her hot tears and ran his thumb through them. Then he kissed them. "You came home because it was your Fate. Amoro said you would be back. He said that you could run to the ends of the world, but that you would always find your way back because the Fates demand it."

"Amoro? Who's-?"

"Later," Ron whispered. "Hermione, I know you didn't want to come back because of me. I know I hurt you – I hurt everyone, I think – but I hurt you the worst. I don't know why I did it, but I did. I'm so very, very sorry. And I swear to you that I will never, never hurt you like that again. Not ever. I'll even make an Unbreakable Vow, here and now." Something covered his eyes, and he heard Hermione giggle.

"I don't think that will be necessary," she said as she brushed his ginger fringe from out of his eyes.

"Wha-?" he said, and reached up. Sure enough his head was full of hair again, and it was long and silky and just as wonderful as he

remembered it being. "I have my hair back," he said, stating the obvious.

"So it seems." She was smiling. She ran her hand through his restored locks, and tingles of awareness stole his breath as her nails slipped over his scale. Merlin, he wanted to kiss her.

"What time is it, do you know?"

"Near on three, I reckon," Ron told her. "Are you going to get Harry?"

She snuggled in close to him, and he felt her arm snake around his middle. "I'm not going anywhere," she said pressing her nose to the middle of his chest. But then she went still, and pulled away. She looked up into his eyes, the moonlight glittering there. "You're not going to tell anyone are you?"

"About the train bridge? No."

"Not even Harry?"

"No one."

"Are you sure?" she asked. "It's terribly hard to keep this kind of secret. You tell me something you don't want anyone else to know, and we'll share the burden together."

"I don't think so."

"Yes," she said, and propped herself up on an elbow, her cheek in her palm. "Tell me something about you that I would never in a million years guess. Something you'd simply die over if, say, Fred and George found out."

"You want ammunition," Ron accused, pushing himself up on an elbow. "You want to blackmail me."

"This is about trust, Ron. I wouldn't betray your confidence, just as I know you wouldn't betray mine. I want to know about you, but even

more than that, I'd like something private with you, something no one else has. Not even Harry."

He studied her earnest face, her strong, expressive brows, her bright brown eyes now dark and mysterious in the dim night light. She tugged at his heart when she was like this, and while he didn't resent it like he once had he wasn't completely comfortable with this hold she had over him. He knew he couldn't refuse her. It was...unnerving.

"Well," he said, trying to think of something she'd find suitable. "I suppose...well...I suppose..." He couldn't look at her, so he dropped down on to his back, even though he was pressed right up against her. He could feel her breath on his cheek. "I used to wank quite a bit."

He could practically hear her roll her eyes. "Used to? Come now, everyone does that. I mean something I'd never even think of. Tell me a secret."

His mind screamed. "Everyone, Hermione?"

Her voice was low, almost a whispered when she said: "Something I'd never guess."

One would think it was a simple request, but Ron found it exceedingly difficult. "I don't think I have any secrets like that. I mean, I'm really a very simple bloke."

Her finger began drawing a loopy line on his chest, and it ran over one nipple, and it reflexively tightened. Ron had to hold his breath for a moment, and in that moment he knew what he would tell her. He closed his eyes. "You won't tell anyone? It's just between you and me?"

"I swear," she said solemnly.

"I had a sex dream," he told her.

She sighed, exasperated. "Ron, come on."

"About Harry," he added, and felt a little sick. She went statue-still beside him.

"Uh...really?"

"Really."

He heard her swallow, but he couldn't bring himself to look at her. He never should've said anything. It had been a mistake to ever speak those words.

"Are you trying to tell me...you fancy Harry?" Her voice faltered a little.

"What? No!" He shot up in the bed. "It's not like that!"

"OK," she said quietly, meeting his eyes with her own confused gaze. She didn't look as if she believed him.

"It was you and me, in my dream. We were lying in bed, and your back was to me and...I was touching you."

"You had a sex dream about me?" she asked, now more hopeful.

"Yes! Uh...no. I don't know. We were there, and I was kissing you, and then suddenly he was there, too."

Her eyes went wide and she tried to hide a smirk. "Really? All three of us?"

"Fred and George put the thought in my head, those wankers. Oh, and you should know that Fred has a thing for you, so watch him. He's a perv, that one is. And so I went to sleep that night with that horrible idea in my head, and well..." He didn't want to finish the thought. Was it terribly hot in there? Was the room running out of air?

"Let me get this straight," Hermione said in pragmatic tone. "You had a dream, and in this dream you and I were in bed together? And you were touching and kissing me?"

"Yeah, I guess. Yes."

"And," she continued, "then you touched Harry?"

"No! Bloody hell, Hermione!" He grabbed his head to keep it from exploding.

"Did you...kiss him?"

"I never should've told you anything," he muttered under his breath.

"But I don't see how that's a sex dream about Harry."

"Well, see - I don't know why I keep talking about this, I really don't - he took his hand, and he put it over yours – in my dream, see – and then he put your hand on my leg."

Her brows rose. "And?"

"High on my leg."

"And?"

"And then I woke up, didn't I?" he told her. "Nightmare, it was. Blood rutting nightmare!"

She considered him, and then pulled him back down beside her, and pulled the covers up again. "Ron, I don't think it was about sex, or about Harry."

"Well, you weren't there."

"I think," she said in her assertive, authoritative tone, "that it was about you and me, and about no matter how close we get Harry will always be there."

He looked at her for a moment to see if she was teasing him. "I don't know. I don't think I'm that deep."

"I do hope Harry is always there, Ron. Not between us, and certainly not with us physically on nights like this, but he's our best friend, and he holds a very special place in both of our lives."

"But not in our bed. He has no business being there."

She smirked. "Agreed."

"And you shouldn't be parading around in your knickers in front of him, either," Ron added.

"He's seen me in my knickers before, Ron. It was hardly a revelation for him."

"I don't care," Ron told her. "You're my girl, not his."

She pushed away from him, and Ron thought she was going to start yelling, but instead she looked at him with a curious expression. "I'm your girl?" she asked.

"Aren't you?"

"Humph," she said non-committally, and relaxed back down, so that her head was pillowed on his shoulder, her arm draped over his belly.

He wrapped his arm across her waist, too, and let his fingers play over the bumps of her spine. To say anything more risked ruining the moment, and Ron decided to simply take pleasure in the feel of her body embracing his. She would be leaving again soon – this time to Hogwarts, with Ginny. Ron glanced back at Jack in his little bed, suckling in his sleep. Enjoy this moment, he told himself, because the world can change in an instant.

End of chapter 15

End of Part III

Part IV: The War
Chapter 16 – Awkward Good-bye

Lupin was not well when Harry and Moody went to let him out the next day. Both Hermione and Molly were called in to Heal him as best as they could as Lupin, afflicted with lycanthropy, was not welcome at St. Mungo's or any wizarding hospital. Both women worked on Lupin until they practically collapsed from exhaustion. Then, he pushed them away, and hobbled down the stairs to the parlor where Harry and Ron and Ginny were waiting.

Lupin didn't see them though, he went straight for his son who was sleeping limply across Ron's lap. "Give him to me," he said, and raised his battered and bruised arms out, his sleeves in rags. Ron hesitated. Lupin looked worse than Ron had ever seen him, and he wasn't entirely sure that he'd be able to hold Jack without dropping him.

"Uh, Remus," Harry said, as kindly and gently as possible. "Jack's all right for now. Why don't you go and get a few more hours of sleep."

"Give him to me," he said again, this time more forcefully. "He's my son. I'm taking him away from here."

Ron looked at Harry for some sort of guidance, but he was no help. If Lupin wanted his son, he was his to take. Ron carefully lifted Jack so he wouldn't wake and, with a heavy heart, placed him Lupin's ravaged hands.

"Where are you going?" Ron asked. "Back to your flat?"

"Away," Lupin told him, staring down at his child. He pulled the baby close to his chest, kissed his forehead. "He's his mother's son. I do believe his hair is pink."

"Away where?" Ron pressed. "Never away, away."

"Away from here. From this bloody war."

"No!" Ron cried out.

"Remus, are you sure?" This came from Ron's mum in the doorway. She and Hermione had followed him, and they both looked as if each of them could sleep for a week.

"No," he said, and then left.

Ron made to go after him, but Harry caught him by the arm. "You have to let him go."

"No! I let Hermione go, and look what happened!" he said with a hand outstretched toward her. "Look at what happened to her! It's my fault and I can't just let Lupin—"

"Yes, dear," Ron's mum said sadly. "You must."

"But why?" Ron demanded. "He's taking Jack! And where is a werewolf going to go that'll be safe for a baby? Who will watch Jack when Lupin changes every full moon? He's just grieving, is all. He's not thinking straight, see? He needs us."

"Ron," Hermione said. "It's no good. He has to do what he has to do."

"Right," he snapped. "I'd expect you to say something like that!" He knew instantly that it was a mistake. It wasn't only the stunned, hurt look on her face, but also that the familiar curl of emotions that churned in his belly. He didn't want to feel this kind of anger again. He didn't want to push her away. "No," he said quickly. "No, Hermione. I didn't mean that."

"You did," she said, a quiver in her voice. "You'd expect me to defend his leaving because I left, is that it?"

He shook his head. "No, it's not the same at all, is it? I take it back."

"You can't take it back, can you? It's out there! Isn't it?" Her voice went a bit shrill, and her eyes watered.

"Hang on," Harry said, holding out a hand to both of them. "Let's not get carried away."

Ron huffed in exasperation. "Hermione, you can't possibly get upset every time I say idiotic things! You'll be raving all the time!"

"Well, that's the truth," Ginny snapped, tartly.

"Look, I said I didn't mean it, and I didn't," Ron said, ignoring that last comment. "Please."

Hermione was still brooding, her arms crossed tightly in front of her, but she seemed to at least consider what he'd said. "I suppose you're understandably smarting," she allowed, though somewhat begrudgingly. "After all, you are abnormally attached to Jack."

Ron looked toward the front door again. "Where do you think he'll take - oi! There's nothing abnormal about my attachment to Jack! And anyway, it's hardly an attachment. Jack's just a baby, and he needs looking after, and I look after him."

"And you did a very good job of it," Ron's mum chimed in with a sugary voice. "But we have other gnomes in the garden at the moment. Remus will do what he needs to do for himself and his son. And when the grief lessens a little, we'll see him again."

"How long will that take?" Ron asked her.

"How long for the grief to lessen, you mean? Well, I don't know, dear, but I'll let you know," she solemnly told him.

Ginny returned to Hogwarts, and Hermione with her. The good-bye was awkward and brief, kisses were exchanged, but they seemed more out of duty than real desire, at least from Ron's point of view. He thought Hermione was still fuming a little, and in the two days since Lupin's departure they hadn't so much as held hands. Not that he'd really tried. He was terrified of saying or doing the wrong thing; so much so that Harry at one point glared at him and asked him what his problem was. Ron didn't know how to explain that he was scared of her without looking like the imbecile that he was.

When she was gone, though, he was miserable, and it showed during their lessons.

"Concentrate!" Moody demanded.

Ron felt that he was, but the result was always the same. There didn't seem to be much point. By the end of the session Ron was winded and sweating, and Moody just stood there, his magical eye sizing him up. "I see you got your hair back, pimple," Moody said. "So, you must've figured something out. So then, why are you such a waster tonight?"

"They had another row before she left," Harry said darkly. "And he refuses to send her an owl."

"Huh." Moody continued to stare.

"Look, if my magic is going to go wonky every time Hermione and I have a row I'll never be any use to the Order. I don't know if you've noticed or not," he said to Harry, "but we tend to bicker."

"This wasn't a bicker," Harry told him, crossing his arms. "You rather like the bickering, I think. This was you saying something unkind again—"

"I apologized!" Ron insisted.

"Not really," Harry told him. "Trying to take it back really isn't the same as saying you're sorry."

Ron glared at him. It was clear whose side Harry was on. It was hard enough knowing that Hermione was angry with him still, but to have Harry rub it in was insufferable. And the thing was, Ron had a sneaking suspicion his poor performance during lessons had nothing to do with Hermione. Ron found himself at odd moments in the day thinking about Jack and wondering if he was getting enough to eat, or if he was warm enough. Or if Lupin knew the bounce that could calm him, or the bottom pat. He hated that he didn't know if they were all right. And he hated that Hermione was still mad over something small and petty. And that Harry was a prat over it, too.

"Fine," Ron snapped. "I'll send a bloody owl!"

"Pimple's right, though," Moody said, resigned. "He's no good to us if he can't be consistent. Tonks and I agreed that the easiest way to get him right again was to fix what's between him and his Love. But that'll take a lifetime and we're a little pressed at the moment."

"Can you help him?" Harry asked.

Moody shook his head. "Tonks would've been the best person – she was always good at the touchy-feely rubbish. Lupin might've been good, too."

And if it was possible, the mention of his two friends now gone made Ron feel even more miserable. Yes, the Order had lost a lot in those two, but Ron felt he'd lost infinitely more.

"I'll have to do some asking around," Moody told them, still appraising Ron. "See who's up to the challenge our pimple has become."

The next morning Ron went to the store, but even before he could see it he knew something was wrong. People were hushed and hurrying the opposite way, and no one seemed to want to meet his eyes. When he looked up at the cloudy, dismal spring sky he saw what had them nervous. The Dark Mark loomed above him, bigger than life; an eerie skull eating a knotted snake.

Ron bolted up the street to the store and skidded to a halt once he saw what was left of it. There were the four exterior walls in various states of ruin, all blackened and burned beyond repair. The snow around the store was also black with soot where it had not been melted away completely. There was no upper flat any longer, no roof, and most of the lower floor was rubble and burnt timber and debris. The only thing that remained even semi-intact was the front door, and the ashy sign that hung on it.

The sign wailed when Ron approached. "Oh, now you show up! Now you decide to open!"

The store was still smoking, so it was impossible to go in and see if anything else survived. Ron thought it would be a waste of time, anyway. The devastation was complete.

"Oi!"

Ron turned to see Dedalus Diggle hurrying toward him, his purple velvet robes billowing behind him as he ran. "You all right, there, chap?"

"They blew up my shop!" Ron told him, at a loss for anything else to say. He was too stunned to think beyond the ruin in front of him.

"This is your place, then?" Diggle asked, and then tsked the wreckage.

"It was," Ron said flatly.

"I'm fine," assured the sign. "Should anyone care. No one ever does."

Not even a minute later a dozen Aurors Apparated on site with a dozen muffled pops. Ron and Diggle were surrounded.

"Drop your wands!"

Ron pulled his from his back pocket and tossed it in the snow. "Fred and George are going to kill me," he muttered to himself.

The Aurors didn't detain them long. It was a quick check of their forearms to tell if they were Death Eaters or not, and then a swallow of Stooli (a form of Veritaserum that, while less powerful and over-all less reliable, could be brewed easily, quickly, and cheaply; three traits that made which made it ideal for Aurors to carry at all times) and both Ron and Diggle were quickly cleared. Stooli tasted of grape, and maybe a little lemon, too, and warmed Ron's insides like sherry. He rather liked it.

By this time Moody arrived with Harry, who looked a bit peaked. "We heard your shop-" Harry began, and then his eyes went even wider

as he saw the shop's smoldering remains. "I was worried...we didn't know if you were in there or not."

"Expect Mum will be, too," Ron said. "I should head to the Burrow to let her know I'm good."

"I'll go to Hogwarts and reassure the girls," Harry told him.

"It's only been two days, Harry! Honestly! Give the girl a rest!"

Harry stared blankly at him. "What?"

"I'll go to Hogwarts," Ron told him. "You go to the Burrow."

"Wait a minute - just what were you saying?" Harry's shoulders rose defensively.

"I think we both know what I was saying, Harry. You're like a sex maniac!"

"What?" Harry looked shocked. "What's your problem?"

"My problem? Where do I even begin? My dad and Tonks have been murdered, Lupin's gone and Jack's probably walking by now, Hermione hates me once again, I'm a complete waster, my shop had been flattened," he gesticulated wildly at the smoldering building behind him, "my best mate is bagging my sister, my mother is having a mental crisis, I'm the number two man in a war against the most evil and powerful wizard of all time – and I can't even cast straight! Oh, and by the way, his Death Eaters are targeting me, the Fates have screwed me, and I think I may be a virgin forever!"

Harry gapped at him, as did the small group of Aurors and onlookers who happened to be in the immediate area during Ron's rant. Several flashes went off, announcing the press' arrival.

One of the Aurors stepped forward and cleared his throat. "Yes, I should've mentioned, that Stooli that you drank, well, the after effects should last another ten minutes or so. I'd refrain from talking until then, if I were you. You might spill a bit more than you intend."

Harry took Ron by the arm and pulled him far enough away from everyone to not be overheard. "You took Stooli?" Harry asked. Ron was surprised he'd even heard of it. Ron hadn't.

"They needed to clear me, and I didn't want to go down to the Ministry. It was easier," Ron explained.

Harry shook his head. "Stooli will make you honest and forthright about what you know, Ron. If anyone had mentioned the Order we'd be front page news right now!"

"You're always front page news," Ron countered.

"The Order isn't!" Harry ground out. "Pull yourself together, mate! Go back to number 12 and wait until the Stooli's out of your system."

"You can't tell me what to do," Ron said peevishly. "I'm going to Hogwarts—"

"Look at me, Ron. I'm your best mate, right? You know I have your best interest in mind when I say that you don't want to go to Hogwarts. You don't want to see Hermione when you're like this, and you don't want to encounter anyone who might compromise the Order."

Ron narrowed his eyes on his friend, and weighed his words. "Yeah, you're probably right."

"Of course I am. I'll pop up to the school, and then to the Burrow, and check on you at the manse in a few, yeah?"

"OK," Ron agreed, somewhat reluctantly. He really did want to see Hermione again. "I miss her," he said as Harry turned to go. "She's only been gone two days. It's sick. I'm mental. She's ruined me."

Harry grinned at him. "Yeah. I know what you mean."

That evening Professor McGonagall turned up at their lessons in Moody's stead. "Good evening, gentlemen," she said by way of greeting. "Don't look so surprised to see me, Mr. Weasley. It's poor form." She wore her usual dark robes with a high collar, and her hair

swept up in a bun. She seemed older to Ron, which he attributed to Dumbledore's passing. Most of the people at Hogwarts seemed to have aged disproportionately over the previous year.

"Professor, it's good to see you, of course," Harry said, recovering from the shock of her unexpected appearance at number 12 first. "We were expecting a lesson from Moody this evening."

"Yes, Alastor asked if I would conduct the lesson for him. It seems Mr. Weasley, here, is having some difficulty with emotional infiltration into his magic, and I, being slightly more comfortable talking about such things than Alastor, agreed to help where I can."

Ron never once considered Professor McGonagall to be an emotional creature. In fact, she was probably the most even-tempered, controlled witch he'd ever met. Ever proper, McGonagall was what Ron imagined Hermione growing into.

"Shall we begin?" she asked, though it was clear it wasn't really a question.

Moody turned up later that evening, grumpy as ever, and the fact that Ron had made no progress under McGonagall's instruction didn't help.

"This is not a game, pimple! People are dying!"

"I'm very aware of that," Ron said through gritted teeth.

Moody threw his hands in the air and limped angrily around the room. "Hogsmeade isn't safe anymore – that bloody joke store being burned out is evidence of that. The Death Eaters are on to us. I'm convinced they knew Tonks and Shackbolt were Order, not just Aurors, and that's why they were targeted."

"That would mean...Lupin..." Ron felt his stomach drop. "Do we have any idea where he is? Him and Jack?"

Moody shook his head. "We have bigger problems," he insisted. "Horcruxes."

"They are a problem," Harry agreed. "Hermione and Ginny are doing all the research they can, but their resources are limited. The Hogwarts library simply doesn't acknowledge them. And quite frankly, I can't imagine Voldemort leaving bits of himself around where just anyone with a book could find them. There's got to be more to it. We need to give the girls a place to start looking."

"Agreed. And you," Moody said, his finger and eye pointing straight at Ron, "need to get your act together. Do whatever it takes. Kiss her, bag her, I don't care—"

"Alastor!" McGonagall said, scandalized.

"Just get the job done," he finished. He left grumbling about Fates and teenagers and the lunacy of it all.

It was the middle of the night when Harry woke Ron from a sound sleep. "Pack your things," Harry told him. "We're moving to Hogwarts."

"We are?" Ron asked. His head was still sluggish and groggy from the sexy dream he'd been having.

"It's safe there from the Death Eaters, Hermione and Ginny are there, McGonagall is there and she can tutor you at night, Voldemort spent seven years of his life there, which can't be ignored, and most importantly, Dumbledore's notes and things are there. He'd been doing his own research into the Horcruxes, hadn't he? He's the one who destroyed the Slitheryn ring. No sense in reinventing the wheel."

"You said Hermione?" Ron asked, having missed most of what just spouted from Harry's mouth. "What time is it?"

"It doesn't matter. Get dressed. Get packed. We're going tonight."

They arrived at Hogwarts' gates a couple of hours before the sun came up. Harry sent a message of their arrival by Hedwig, and so they had to wait for someone to come down to let them in. It was cold

and raining, as it always seemed to be in Scotland in the spring, and Ron dropped his pack on the ground and had a seat.

"Suppose they'll let us stay in Gryffindor Tower again?" Ron asked.

"Doubt it. Ginny's there, of course, but they have Hermione in the guest suite in Gryffindor Tower. She says it's quite nice."

Ron looked up at his friend. "You've talked with her?"

"Got an owl yesterday. Didn't you?" Harry asked.

Ron glowered, and kicked at the mud puddle by his foot. "No."

"You said you were going to write," Harry chided him.

"I know, I know."

Filch was the one who finally came to fetch them, looking older and even surlier with his stringy long hair and hooked nose. He forced the two of them through a Dark Arts sensor sweep, which seemed ludicrous to Ron.

"Like you're going to have a Dark object," Ron sputtered on their long walk up to the castle. "And even if you did, what could Filch do about it?"

"You're nervous," Harry observed lightly. "I can tell."

"Don't be silly. What do I have to be nervous about? I can handle Filch."

"We're not going to see her tonight, you know. They're asleep."

"Well, naturally," Ron said. Of course he'd known that, hadn't he? He wasn't really nervous to see her again, was he? Surely not. He caught Harry watching him from the corner of his eye. "What?" Ron demanded.

Harry just shook his head.

They were put in guest quarters in the Ravenclaw Tower. There were two beds similar to the one's they'd slept in as students, but larger and obviously meant for adults. There were two wardrobes, a small sitting area with a double desk near the fireplace and a small, private loo. It wasn't a large apartment, but Ron hardly cared. He kicked off his shoes and fell into the nearest bed.

When Ron woke he was alone in the room, and the sun streamed in through the uncurtained windows. He got up and looked out; a bright and sunny day. He could see the lake and the Forbidden Forest, and a little of Hagrid's hut that was spouting white smoke. A momentary thrill of nostalgia washed over him. Hagrid was in his hut, and Ron was back at Hogwarts. And he didn't have to go to classes!

Ron did his toilet quickly and hurried down to the Great Hall, only to find breakfast long over and lunch not ready to be served. He ran into Seamus and Neville, though, and had a jolly good time catching up with them on their way to their Defense Against the Dark Arts class.

After that he headed down to Hagrid's, who was thrilled to see him, and laughed a great belly laugh when he answered the door. When Ron stepped in the hut he found Harry already enjoying a massive cup of tea and a crumpet the size of his head.

"Oi!" exclaimed Ron. "Any more of those?"

Hagrid happily put a full plate and mug down in front of Ron at the table, and then sat down with them. "Blimey," Hagrid said. "I wasn't 'specting vis'tors. Good to see you both! Hermione came down a few days ago, and we had a right good conversation, we did." He became very serious then. "She's had a rough time of it, hasn't she? Poor wee thing. And such a pretty girl, too. Terrible to see what they've done to her. She's a tough one, though. I dare say she'll come out the other end of this right as rain."

"How did she seem to you?" Harry asked crumpet in hand, but not in mouth. Ron could tell he was trying to ask casually, but he wasn't quite pulling it off.

Hagrid didn't seem to notice. "Oh, well enough, for her. Got a few good smiles out of her, I did. Seemed, I don't know...sad, maybe? Or maybe she was just thinkin' o' other stuff. Yes, distracted, one might say."

The crumpet was Hagrid's usual hard-as-stone fare, and much to Ron's dismay completely inedible. The tea was strong and sweet, just how he liked it. "Did she mention me?" Ron asked.

"Uh...can't say as she did – want some shepherd's pie? Had it for breakfast and I've still a little left."

"Oh, yes, please," Ron said, grateful.

Harry, however seemed to be scrutinizing Hagrid a bit hard, and Ron wondered what he'd missed. He completely forgot to ask once the heaping plate was set down before him. The potatoes were cold, but that hardly slowed Ron up. He tucked in, and gladly.

"Officially, Hagrid, we're here to do a bit of tutoring. That's the pretense Professor McGonagall came up with to allow Ron and I to stay at the school," Harry explained. When Ron choked Harry assured him that any students Ron would be assigned would be first or second years, and never potions or divination. "Unofficially, Hagrid, I'm hoping for a bit of help from you. We'll need certain supplies that will help us find some items to kill Voldemort."

Hagrid winced at the name, and if truth be told, Ron did a little, too. "Supplies? What sort of items?"

"Items that Voldemort doesn't want us to have," Harry told him. Ron wondered why he didn't just come out and say Horcruxes, but then thought that perhaps Hagrid hadn't been let in on that particular bit of knowledge. Probably for the best, Ron decided, as Hagrid's secret-keeping abilities weren't as honed as his culinary talents. Ron spit out what looked like a rock, and placed it on the table beside the plate.

"I've got the gold," Harry continued, a disgusted look on his face as Ron kept eating. "But the climate has changed, and known Order members aren't safe walking the streets anymore. We're counting on our secret operatives, like you, Hagrid, a lot more now."

"Oh, well," Hagrid said, sitting up a bit taller. "Whatever I can do, you know that, Harry!"

"And, of course," Harry said leaning in to speak conspiratorially, "you can't tell anyone why we're really here."

"Mum's the word," Hagrid said quite earnestly. "Won't tell a soul. You can count on me, Harry."

"I know I can," Harry replied.

Ron narrowed his eyes at his friend, and wondered what he was up to. Telling Hagrid something was a secret virtually insured it would be all over the school within the hour. When they left, Ron questioned him on the way back up to the castle.

"You know Hagrid can't keep secrets, don't you?" Ron asked.

"I'm counting on it," Harry said grimly.

"You want people to know we're here collecting items to kill V-voldemort?" Ron didn't know why he was having trouble with that name again, but he was. "It would seem to me to be the kinda thing one might want to keep under wraps."

"I need Voldemort to know that I'm up here so that Moody and Shacklebolt will be able to move a little without constant threat. And, there was some Death Eater activity last night in the Lakes District. Moody's concerned that might be where Lupin is hiding."

This drew Ron's undivided attention. He stopped and tugged Harry's arm to stop him, too. "You haven't heard anything, though. Have you? He's all right, isn't he?"

"We don't know anything," Harry admitted. "I'm sure there would be more information if things had gone badly. But, if we can draw a little of that attention away from Lupin – if it is Lupin – then I say we do it. There's no danger here at Hogwarts. The extra security will keep the students safe enough. The Minister's seen to that," Harry added with a sharp edge to his voice. "And there are undercover Aurors all over the school, to add even more."

"There are?" Ron asked, glancing around.

"Professor Cothwaith, the new DADA teacher, and Kriskin, the Slytherin House Head, are both Aurors, as are several of the support staff, like the new Headmistress Waddington. People were up in arms that McGonagall was over-looked for the post, but she was the first to point out that the post needed to be filled by someone who could look after the protection and well-being of the entire school without the complications of McGonagall's Order loyalties."

"No kidding?" Ron said, stunned. "How do you know all this?"

Harry shrugged. "I ask questions. But mostly I'm not hung-up on a girl every moment of the day, and I think that helps. What are you going to do about Hermione?"

"What? Me? What's there to do?"

"Well, for starters, you could ask her to go with you."

Ron rolled his eyes. "What for? We're Fated!"

"Weren't you the one complaining that she took things for granted, just because the two of you were Fated? Yes, I do believe that was you—"

"Yes, I said that." Ron glowered. "So, she expects me to ask her to go with me? Did she tell you that?"

Harry shook his head and started back toward the castle. "The thing is, Ron, what you said to her, while it wasn't nice, it certainly wasn't as bad as the two of you used to exchange. If you had said

something like that a couple of years ago, you two would've had a row, sure, but then that would be that. You need to learn how to fight again."

"I thought you always hated our rows."

"Yeah, well, that's how you work things out. I don't have to like it for it to work, do I?"

Ron considered this. "Suppose not," he said. "You and Ginny don't fight."

"Oh, yes we do. Just not quite so loudly," Harry told him. "Or often. Or over silly things. But then, we do other things to work out our differences."

"Yeah, I get the picture," Ron said flatly.

"So? Are you going to ask her?" Harry pressed.

"Do you want me to fight with her, or date her?"

"I want you to find a way to make it work," Harry told him.

"What do you think I've been trying to do? Moody said to bag her, Lupin said to adore her, you say to bicker with her – blood hell! Maybe Hagrid's got some advice for me, as well!"

The clock tower struck noon.

"Great!" Ron said, his frustration totally forgotten. "Let's get lunch."

"But you just ate," Harry told him.

"Just shepherd's pie. I could do with a little roast."

The moment they stepped inside the castle walls they were noticed. Clumps of students from first years on up gathered and gossiped and pointed as Harry and Ron walked by. It got worse when they entered the Great Hall. Ron's mouth watered when he smelled the amazing aroma of lunch, but he was distracted by the startled gasp, and then

a flash of ginger as his sister leapt up from her seat at the Gryffindor table and threw herself into Harry's arms. They kissed, however briefly, but it was long enough for rowdy whistles from the boys and blissful sighs from the girls to ring out. The girls, then, of course, dissolved into giggles.

Hermione got up too, her eyes wide and fixed on Ron. She hurried to him, but in a very different way. "Is everything all right?" she asked him in a whisper, leaning in close. "Who's been hurt?" He could smell apples on her breath.

"No one," Ron told her. "We, well, we've moved to Hogwarts."

This shocked her enough to take a step back from him. "You did? Whatever for?"

"Well, the shop was burned to the ground—"

"No!" she said, and covered her mouth with her hands.

"And Harry's trying to make a distraction for Lupin, and I think we're going to be tutors."

Her hands dropped. "What?"

"And McGonagall's not the Head Mistress."

"Well, yes, I knew that. Are you quite all right?"

Was he all right? He hardly knew. His vision was so full of her eyes that he couldn't think of anything else, and his chest was too tight to breathe. "Will you go with me?"

Her brows knit in confusion. "Of course. Go where?"

He couldn't bring himself to clarify. He grabbed her shoulders and kissed her hard. Around him it sounded as if sirens were going off. Belatedly he realized it was probably just their audience.

Hermione pushed him away. "What are you doing?" she demanded, low and harsh.

"I-I don't know," he whispered to her.

"Have you been Confunded?"

"I...I don't believe so."

"Harry," she said, talking past him. "What have you done to Ron?"

"Nothing," he heard from somewhere behind him. "What's wrong with him?"

"He looks a bit peaked. Are you going to be sick? Why don't we go up and see Madame Pomfrey?" Hermione suggested. "Ron, you're sweating."

"Am I?" He put a hand to his brow and sure enough it came back damp. "I think maybe I'm having a heart attack," he said, realizing for the first time that his heart was, indeed, pounding.

Harry grabbed him by the arm and pulled him out of the Great Hall. "It's all right," he said to Hermione over his shoulder. Give us a minute. He's not having a heart attack, already! Stay there!"

When they were clear of the doors Harry pushed Ron up against the wall so he'd have something to prop him up. "Get a grip, mate! You're losing it."

"I asked her to go with me," Ron said, and he felt half his mouth lift into a smile.

"You did?" This seemed to surprise Harry. "What did she say?"

"Yes, of course," Ron told him. "And then she wanted to know where we were going."

Harry covered his laugh. "Well, at least the foundation is laid. Ron? Breathe, Ron! Listen, it's Hermione. We've known her forever. It's just

her, yeah? And you're already Fated, so it's like the work is done for you. You know she Loves you. We all know she Loves you, mate."

"I'm a waster, Harry, you know that. She could be unconscious and still I'd mess things up."

"What about the seed?"

"What?" Ron had completely forgotten his birthday present. "You think I should take it?"

"Are you really all right, Ron?" Hermione asked, coming up beside Harry with concern plainly written on her face.

"He's fine," Harry assured her.

"Fine," Ron squeaked.

"Well, I need to get back to Arithmancy," Ginny announced. She smiled at Harry. "I'm so glad you're here." Then she stood on tip-toes and kissed Harry. His arms wrapped around her middle and he pulled her closer, much to the delight of the giggling gaggle of girls who happened to be passing.

Professor McGonagall was less thrilled. "Ahem," she said, clearing her throat. "Mr. Potter!" Both Harry and Ginny jumped apart and blushed darkly. "As you are here at Hogwarts in a minor teaching role you will refrain from kissing the students!" She turned and seemed to see Ron for the first time. "Oh, hello, Mr. Weasley." Then she eyed Hermione. "Of course, Miss Granger, you are technically not a student here, but rather an apprentice." And with that, she whirled around and left.

"What was that supposed to mean?" Hermione demanded, casting an accusing eye to Ron.

He had no desire to explain about his private lessons with McGonagall, or the advice he'd received from a multitude of sources. "Haven't the foggiest," he said with a shrug. That shouldn't be too

hard for her to believe, Ron thought. Most of the time he hadn't a clue as to what people were taking about.

Ginny finished glaring at McGonagall's back, and then turned and flashed Harry a shy smile. "Well, I'll see you," she said.

"Tonight," he replied, and her face lit up. He quickly added, "We need to talk Horcruxes and figure out a game plan. Brainstorming."

"Oh," she said. "Right, then. Sounds good. Will I see you at supper?"

"Wouldn't miss it," Harry crooned suggestively. Ron's appetite vanished.

After their evening meal, the four decided to deliberate in Hermione's new quarters as the library was too public for the sort of conversation they would be having, and Ginny, who was still a student, wasn't allowed in professor's quarters – even if Harry and Ron weren't technically professors. Evenings were still a bit chilly in Scotland by mid-April, and Hermione lit a small fire in the hearth. They gathered there on cushions. Hermione had a roll of parchment and a quill, and she seemed keyed up to be actively doing something to help the Order again. Ron liked seeing her this way again; determined and excited.

"What do we know about the Horcruxes?" she asked, and looked expectantly at Harry.

"Well," he began, "I know that Voldemort made six in total – or at least that was Dumbledore's theory; six plus the one within his body, which makes seven, the most powerfully magic number. And of those three, at least three have been destroyed. His grandfather's ring – his mother's father was called Marvolo, and it was his ring with the black stone that was the Horcrux Dumbledore destroyed last summer. Then, there was Tom Riddle's diary, which I destroyed second year; and the gold cup that used to belong to Hufflepuff. Moody, Shackbolt and I destroyed that last month."

"That leaves us with three," Hermione said, checking over what she'd just written down.

"Dumbledore thought that Voldemort's snake Nagini was could be a Horcrux. He said something about the unusual control Voldemort has over her, and how having a piece of his soul inside her might account for that."

"Sounds like he was reaching," Ginny remarked. "Can living creatures even be Horcuxes? What if they die? How long could a snake possibly live?"

"That's something we need to find out, but Dumbledore seemed to think so, even if it's not prudent," Harry said. "And don't forget about Slytherin's locket. Dumbledore and I went after it last year, but it had already been taken by someone calling themselves RAB."

"All right, then. Assuming Dumbledore is right," Hermione said, "that leaves us with two Horcruxes to discover and three to locate. That doesn't sound so bad. Harry, how did you figure out where to find Hufflepuff's cup?"

He shrugged. "A lot of guess work. I just had trouble believing that Draco would know about the Cave of Regret and the Cup of Oaths. I mean, it's not like he was ever interested in actively seeking knowledge out, was he? And the Cave, it's so remote and so seemingly random, and I reckoned that someone would've had to tell him to go there, at least initially, as he'd never find the place on his own. And why would someone send him there? And who? His father, right? But he's in Azkaban. Someone else who had control over him? I could only think of one other person who could make Draco do anything.

"But what would Voldemort want with the Cave?" Harry continued. "Did he want the Cup? While that was certainly a possibility it felt redundant to me."

"Right," Hermione cut in. "He already has his own version of the Cup of Oaths in the Dark Marks. And he can exert some level of control on his followers through the Marks, too, without having to depend on an oath. Voldemort wouldn't want the Cup, he'd consider it weak."

"He could've been using it as a test for Draco," Ron volunteered. "You know, to see what his abilities are."

"I think Voldemort's pretty good at sizing up people's abilities," Harry quipped. "I don't think he's under any delusions that Draco is capable."

"But, he trusted Draco's abilities in getting his Horcrux, didn't he?" Ginny queried. "I mean, that's what you're saying: that Voldemort sent Draco to fetch his Hufflepuff cup before you had a chance to find it."

"Well, the Horcrux itself wasn't very well guarded – at least in comparison to where he hid the locket. It took all of five minutes to actually get the cup. It was the destroying that took days and nights of doing, and blew up the Cave," Harry informed them. "If all Draco had to do was fetch it, then I'd say he was probably up to the challenge."

"Then Voldemort didn't size up Draco very well, did he?" Ron posed. "I mean, Voldemort sent him thinking Draco would do as ordered, but he didn't, did he?"

"Good point," Harry said. "It wouldn't be the first time Voldemort underestimated youth."

"Or," Ginny interjected, "maybe Voldemort was hoping to tempt Draco or maybe he had a plan to lure Harry there and he wanted Draco to be a look-out. I mean, where would someone like Draco learn a Fate curse?"

"Certainly not on his own," Hermione insisted.

"Certainly not!" Ginny agreed.

"Another good point," Harry said. "Regardless, there was a Horcrux there, and now there's not."

"But why the Cave of Regret?" Hermione asked. None of them had an answer. "If we knew that, perhaps we'd know where to look for the remaining two Horcruxes. Also, we should try to figure out the order

he made the Horcruxes in. If we know where and who each were made from, that might also give us some answers as to what we're looking for."

"Well, from what I saw in Dumbledore's pensive..." Harry began and then his eyes glazed over as he stared into the fire, thinking. "I really do believe the first time Tom Riddle killed a person it was his father. And...well, I don't know for sure, but that could've been when he made the diary. I mean, it makes sense that the diary would be something he'd have on him, something before he was able to steal Marvolo's ring, right? And the diary, well, Riddle had no friends; not a single one. Dumbledore said several times that Riddle was incapable of real friendship, of compassion and love on any level. So, it also, then, makes sense that if he kept a diary it might very well be his only confider. And that would give it an extremely high value in his eyes. If he killed his father, and created his first Horcrux that day, certainly it would be with something he valued above all else in his possession, would it not?"

"That makes sense," Ginny agreed. "But why do you think it was created first? Before the ring? If he stole the ring from his dead father's hand, then why couldn't he have made a Horcrux of it then?"

Harry shook his head and thought again. "I think he went with the intention of making a Horcrux. That he took the diary with him and then lucked out when he found the ring. He was always on the lookout for trophies. And, he killed Moaning Myrtle, you know."

"NO!" the other three cried in unison.

Hermione continued, though, a little faster composed than the others. "Well, I suppose that would make sense. So you think he made the second Horcrux, the ring, from Moaning Myrtle?"

"Dumbledore didn't come right out and say it," Harry told them, "but I saw him question Riddle on the stairs right after the incident, and Riddle was wearing his grandfather's ring that day."

"So the first two Horcruxes were created while Riddle was still a student here?" Ginny asked, shivering a little at the idea. "While he lived in these walls? While he was still a kid?"

Harry nodded. "That's my theory."

Ron felt a little green.

"Three more Horcruxes. Any ideas what they might be? We've two personal items of Voldemort, the diary and the ring, and a locket from Slytherin and a cup from Hufflepuff. We still need to find the real locket, of course."

"Something from Ravenclaw and Gryffindor, then?" Ginny suggested.

"Makes sense," Harry agreed. "Voldemort stole the Hufflepuff cup himself, from an elderly witch. I think her name was Smith. Dumbledore said she was a descendant of Hufflepuff."

"We need to know more about Godric Gryffindor and Rowena Ravenclaw," Hermione said.

"Really? Isn't it all in Hogwarts: A History?" Ron teased.

"Why don't you read it and find out for yourself?" she countered.

"Yeah, you'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"Actually, I would," Hermione said.

Was that a dare? Ron wondered. He remembered Lupin's suggestion and shuddered. "But I – I don't want to read it!"

Hermione rolled her eyes and went back to her parchment. "We have quite a bit of research. Shall we divide some of this up? Ravenclaw and Gryffindor should be easy to look up. Trying to find out Voldemort's connection to the Cave of Regret might take some more doing, as will the Horcrux research. I've been all through the restricted section last year and there's nothing on Horcruxes. Remember Harry?"

"Slughorn knows something about them," Harry told them. "Quite a lot, actually."

"Good," said Hermione. "You work on him, Ginny you can see what there is in the library about Ravenclaw and Gryffindor, and I'll see what I can find out about Horcruxes and if they can be made of living creatures. If we can discount Dumbledore's theory, then we narrow our field a bit."

"I doubt we'll be able to do that," Ron remarked. "Hadn't Dumbledore been working on this for years? One would think a wizard with as many brains as he had would've gathered if a Horcrux can be made of a living thing or not. My bet is that they can, or there's not evidence that they can't."

Hermione stared at him for a moment, and then a slow, wide smile spread across her face. Ron felt himself go hot.

"Also," Harry added, "could you try to find out if there's a better way to destroy them? I don't relish the idea of going through that ordeal again if it can be helped."

"Right," Hermione said, head back down as she scratched intently on her parchment.

"Wait," Ron said, sitting up. "What am I going to do, then?"

"Research involves books, Ron," Ginny teased.

"Well, I can study, you know," Ron said sulkily, "I managed seven O.W.L.s, didn't I?"

"Why don't you see if you can find any surviving descendants of Gryffindor or Ravenclaw?" Hermione suggested. "The Ministry probably knows."

"Right," said Ron, though now a task was put to him he was feeling a bit overwhelmed.

"It's getting late," Ginny said, "and I have to be back in the dorms soon. Care to walk me back to Gryffindor Tower, Mr. Potter?"

This pulled Harry out of a thinking daze. "Oh, right. Sure."

They got up and went to leave, but Harry kissed her before they went out the door. It was longer and wetter than Ron felt was absolutely necessary, and he stared into the fire and tried very hard to pretend it wasn't happening. When he heard the door shut, he turned to Hermione. "Guess they had to get that out of the way before they went back out in public," he quipped. "Wish they'd consider us public."

She gave him a faint smile. "Oh, Professor McGonagall asked me to give this to you." She pulled a small folded piece of parchment from her jumper pocket. It was sealed with red and gold wax and McGonagall's stamp.

Ron tore it open. He'd never received a note from a teacher before, and he felt a little anxious. Had he already gotten into trouble? He wasn't even a student! Could she give him detention?

"It's telling me we'll start our lessons tomorrow evening," he explained after reading her loopy, slanted writing.

"You're taking lessons?" Hermione asked. She sounded almost jealous.

"It's for the Order," Ron told her, and then he explained about his troubles with consistency and emotional magic, as Moody had taken to calling it. "She's going to try and sort some things out for me, I suppose."

"What things?" Hermione asked, though he thought she probably knew, as she was staring into the flames and not looking at him. This was one of the many things about girls Ron didn't understand. If they knew, then why did they ask?

"Hermione, what is it about us that makes this so difficult? Why can't it be as easy for us as it is for Harry and Ginny?"

Her brows worked as she considered his question. "I suppose, because you're not Harry, and I'm not Ginny," she said after a moment. "They're a lot alike; both stubborn and strong and loyal. They both love Quidditch and flying. They both know how to bend the rules just far enough to get what they want, and how to take care of themselves in a fight."

"We're not so different," Ron insisted.

"Name one thing we have in common," she challenged. "Besides Harry and Ginny."

"Well," Ron said as he thought. "We both...uh..." He liked food and sleeping and Quidditch and sweets. Had Hermione even shown any interest in any of those things? She liked books and homework and picking the crisp off her fish. "Come to think of it, why do you even like me?" Ron asked. "Why did you ever become my friend?"

The answer was obvious, of course. "Harry," they said in unison.

"But at the end of the day, Ron, it wasn't ever Harry I was thinking about."

"No," he quipped, "I rarely thought about him, either."

She smirked. "I'll go with you," she said, and her eyes immediately went back to the fire.

Ron had to fight the 'Go where?' that was dying to bust out of him. "Good, then. It's official."

"Good," she echoed, and smiled at him. He smiled back. "So...do you want to snog, or something? Since it's official."

"Always," Ron breathed. "I'm eighteen."

She rolled on to her knees, and crawled toward him, and he did the same. They met on the cushion between them, nervous and too self-conscious to know where to begin. He leaned down to her, afraid to

actually touch her, and as she looked up to him they brushed lips. Barely contact, and still there was something tingly about the warmth of her lips against his. He kissed her again, tentative and shy, aware that they were making some sort of promise through the small little kisses.

His heart began to speed up a little, and he felt it thumping hard in his chest. He wanted to feel her throat under his fingertip, run his hands through her short, soft hair. He wanted to find that special place at the base of her spine and smooth his palm over it, but he waited for a sign that it would be all right to touch her with anything but his lips. Where were her hands? He opened his eyes and pulled away a little and found she must've thought much the same as he did. Her arms were up and bent as if to embrace him, but somehow they'd gotten frozen in mid-air. When she came to her senses and opened her eyes she blushed to discover he'd been watching her.

Slowly he took her hands in his, and led her palms to his sides. Then he cupped her neck, ran his fingers up to curve around the back of her head, and he kissed her again. She instantly deepened the kiss, and her tongue quickly found his. Her body crushed against him. They both groaned. Thrills of excitement twittered through Ron's middle and seemed to boil deep within his pelvis.

Skin on skin, and he realized her hands had made it under his shirt. The muscles of his stomach jumped as her fingers smoothed over them. His breath caught and he wasn't sure he'd ever find it again. His head started to buzz. She ran her fingers down, then, over the front of his jeans, and his whole body jerked. A strangled grunt ripped out of his throat. He stopped thinking at that point and pushed her backward on to the floor. He dove after her. She pushed and tugged at him until his hips were nestled snugly between her thighs, and he found himself thrusting as he hungrily kissed her neck.

Slow down, he told himself, but he couldn't bring himself to stop. She felt so incredibly good, and soft, and he was so bloody excited! One of her hands grabbed his and pulled it down, and it took him a second to realize she'd lifted the hem of her shirt and placed his palm over her breast. He was momentarily torn between kissing her neck and

looking at her bra – and the hard nipple just below it. He whimpered knowing breast always wins out over neck.

"Blood hell," he whispered under his breath, as he watched her round breast move between his fingers. He'd felt Lavender's, but only through her jumper, and it was nothing – nothing – compared to Hermione's perfect body. He ducked his head, and kissed her nipple through the fabric, suckled a little, gently explored it with his teeth. Hermione's response was immediate; she grabbed his head, whimpered that high-pitched sound that went straight to his crotch, and she bucked up beneath him giving his privates even more to scream about.

Slow this down, he warned himself. Then, he hooked a finger around the cup of her bra and pulled it aside. And there it was, all pink and puckered and wet from his mouth. He latched on and she cried out again – a similar sound he'd heard coming out of his sister that time he'd walked in on her and Harry.

"Oh, my!" It was McGonagall's shocked voice, but Hermione was already pushing Ron off of her before he registered it.

His mind refused to work, and his body cried foul at being so abruptly parted with such pleasure. He did manage to push himself up to sit on his heels. Luckily, Hermione had the presence of mind to push one of the pillows from the floor over his lap as she righted her top.

"I was – what I mean to say is, I heard – I thought, oh bugger," McGonagall said in a most un-McGonagall-like way. "Never mind, then. Mr. Weasley!" Ron sat up a little straighter, not even able to contemplate the horrible fate that might be in store for him. But then, McGonagall glared at him over her spectacles and said very clearly, "Carry on." And then, she left.

"Carry on?" Hermione echoed, incredulously.

A second later the door swung open again. "Oh, and Miss Granger," McGonagall said, her eyes averted. "I trust you will keep your door locked in the future. We can't have the students asking all kinds of

uncomfortable questions and getting fresh ideas, can we?" And then she left, again.

Hermione held out her hand and her wand shot right into it. She waved it at the door. Ron heard the door lock.

"Whoa," he said, still staring at her wand.

His admiration left her with a shy smiling. "It just did it one day. Held out my hand and the wand was there. It knows lots of little tricks like that," she said, though she didn't look pleased. Actually, Ron thought, she looked thoroughly kissed. "I can't believe she saw us," Hermione whimpered, and then dropped her face into her hands. "How mortifying!"

Ron grunted his agreement. But now that she was gone, couldn't he have the boob back?

"You should probably go," Hermione said, sadly. "I didn't really think things would get as carried away as they did."

Ron grunted again. He seriously doubted he could walk at the moment.

"I'm still grieving," Hermione continued, seemingly oblivious to Ron's discomfort. "Or, well, I should be. I'm fairly sure this isn't how one behaves when they're grieving. I mean, he was my finance, after all, and was about to be my husband. And he died. He died for me. I shouldn't be able to kiss you like that. Should I? Oh, what's wrong with me?" She jumped up from the floor and fled out of the room. Ron would've gone after her if he'd been in any shape to.

He sat there for another ten minutes waiting for pressures to recede, and blood flow to return to normal. Then he waited another ten for the excruciating pain in his bollocks to wane. It was about the time Ron could finally make it to the small couch that Harry came in. He sat down next to him.

"So," Harry said.

Ron closed his eyes as the heat climbed up his throat and cheeks.

"Hermione ran into the Common Room just as I was leaving. She looked pretty-"

"Upset?" Ron asked. "Sounds a bit right."

"Worked up, I'd say. And sporting some fresh bites on her neck. She started babbling things that I'm pretty sure I wasn't meant to hear, and I thought I'd pop around and see how you're getting on. From that smile on your face I'd say fair."

"I'm not smiling," Ron told him, and forced his facial muscles to relax.

Harry chuckled. "It's brilliant, isn't it? I mean, at first it's a bit of a shock that it's happened and all, but then, when you get a chance to absorb, it's ruddy brilliant!" It had been a long time since Ron had seen Harry so animated. And he seemed almost relieved, Ron thought. "You did a charm, right? You remembered just before?"

"Just before what? What are you on about?"

"A Contraceptive Charm – oh, never mind, it's Hermione after all. I'm sure she took care of–"

"We didn't," Ron said flatly.

"Oh," said Harry. He instantly deflated. "Oh, well, then. I'm sure Madame Pomphrey know's some 'just after' charms, as well. Do they have just after charms? They must."

"Harry," Ron said. "We didn't have sex."

"Oh," he said, and then seemed at a loss. Ron rolled his eyes. "Why not?"

"When Professor McGonagall walked in on us, it kinda broke the mood. But honestly, Harry, I don't know that we were that close. I mean, it was brilliant and all, but I wasn't thinking about anything beyond a real good snog. Well, and her tatties, which are lovely."

"Yeah," said Harry. Ron glared at him, and Harry quickly steered the subject back to safe territory. "So, McGonagall? No wonder Hermione was upset."

"And McGonagall just said, 'Carry on,' like she wanted us to do it."

"I expect she does," Harry told him. "We all do."

"Well, it's none of your business! Lot of busy-bodies is what you are! I don't like the pressure. It's bad enough you got me to ask her to go with me!"

"Yeah, but she mistook you," Harry reminded.

"Naw, she said later after you and Ginny left tonight that she'd go with me. So, it's official."

"Congratulations!" Harry clapped him on the shoulder. Ron glowered at him. "What? It's not a good thing?"

"Of course it is! It's bleeding fantastic! But I didn't want to ask her because you wanted me to. I wanted to do it because, well, I wanted to! I don't want to bag her because Moody wants me to, and I certainly don't want to read with her! I feel like she's some sort of homework assignment and who wants to date homework?" Then he added in a small voice: "Hermione always did my homework."

Harry didn't say anything, so Ron continued. "I know everyone wants us to...do it. McGonagall even said, 'Carry on,' as she ran back out the door. But honestly, Harry, what's it going to fix? How will doing that change my magic?"

Harry considered his question. "Remember last year when I got the Felix Felicis Potion from Slughorn? And you thought I put it in your pumpkin juice? And then you went out and played the best game of Quidditch in your life, even though I didn't give you the potion? You made your own luck that day."

"So? I sleep with Hermione and suddenly everything is right as rain between us? We become you and Ginny? I don't think so. And neither does Hermione. She basically spelled it out for me tonight. We're not you. We're not even close. And us...being together, it's not going to change that, is it? And all this prodding and pushing, it's just making things, I dunno – weird."

"Then don't," Harry told him.

Ron eyed him. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, don't do it if you don't want to."

Ron rolled his eyes. "Of course I want to! I always want to."

"Then what is your problem?"

Ron scowled. Harry didn't understand. But then, he had his girl - his perfect compliment. Actually, he'd had two perfect girls. "Is it really all that great?" Ron asked, defeated.

"Yes," Harry told him without hesitation. "But really, mate, don't do it if you're not ready."

"What about McGonagall and Moody and the rest of them?"

"Screw 'em," Harry told him, a smile on his face.

"And what about my magic, then? You'll be minus one Smisurato."

Harry shrugged. "Then I'm minus one Smisurato. Look, there's more to a relationship than sex and snogging. I think Moody and them reckoned sex might be faster than actually figuring out your emotions and then dealing with them, but maybe for you that's what it'll take. When it's right for you and Hermione, it'll happen."

"Yeah," said Ron, already feeling a little better. And then he thought about what Harry had said. "Wait. I have to figure out my emotions and deal with them? Doesn't that sound a little much for the likes of me?"

"Yeah, well, I suppose that's why they were thinking sex might be faster," Harry said dryly.

"Ha ha." Ron was not amused. "Maybe she won't want to. No one's bothered to consider how she might feel about it. I mean, she's already done it, so she knows that sex is for the bloke. Maybe she'd rather just stick to the snogging. She seems to like that fair enough."

Harry turned to him with a puzzled expression. "What are you on about?"

"Well, come on, Harry. It's not like she can top-off, or anything. She's a girl, after all."

"What? Girls can...top-off. If that means what I think it means."

"Right," Ron said, and snorted his amusement.

"I'm serious. Girls can top-off." And Harry did sound serious, too. But the whole subject was far too ludicrous for Ron to even contemplate.

"Oh, sure," he said. "Without bollocks, girls can top-off!"

"They have other bits, Ron. They don't need bollocks."

"No, they can't," Ron said, now not at all sure.

"You're going to have to trust me on this," Harry said. "Didn't your five older brothers teach you anything?"

Nothing of consequence, it seemed. "So, then...Hermione...she's..."

"Uh...yeah," Harry said, going a bit red about the ears.

"And with Viktor, too? I mean, did she even sleep with him? Maybe she didn't. What do you know? Has Ginny said anything to you?"

Harry gritted his teeth. "Look, this situation is weird and complicated. Even though I don't have those feelings for her anymore, I do still

remember...and it's weird. I don't think we should discuss Hermione like this. I mean, I really don't want to think about the two of you like that, and I'm sure you don't want to think about us—"

"No!" Ron said quickly.

"There are just some things that need to be off limits."

"Absolutely," Ron told him. "Agreed."

"It's not that I'm not happy for you both...I am. And I'm mad about Ginny, but I reckon you know that."

"And I'm happy that you and Ginny are happy. But we don't need to talk about it. I get it. I shouldn't have asked."

They were silent for a moment, and then Harry said quietly, "You're my best mates, the both of you. Wait until it's right."

"What if it's never right?" Ron asked.

"Well, I suppose there are worse things. She's here, and she's safe. And we're together."

"Cheers."

The following morning Harry was given a list of five fourth year's names, all of whom were having a bit of trouble with their DADA class, and weren't expected to even make A's on their O.W.L.s the following year. Forty girls showed up, and several boys as well, including Terry Boot who glared menacingly at Harry from his pout in the corner. McGonagall didn't mention the extra students, and Ron supposed it couldn't have been very surprising that half the school would turn out to see The Chosen One lead instruction in Defense Against the Dark Arts.

McGonagall then led Ron and two sixth years out - both girls who seemed resentful that their tutor wasn't going to be The Harry Potter - and over to the infirmary where Hermione waved happily, and Madame Pomphrey gave him a knowing nod.

"Right, then, Mr. Weasley," Professor McGonagall began. "This is Charity Knowles and Ruby Wu. Both young ladies have yet to successfully Apparate and their birthdays are rapidly approaching. As you've achieved your license you're perfectly qualified to assist them in their attempts to master the skill. Should you have any splinching, Madam Pomphrey is at your disposal and she can fetch the Ministry's Accidental Magic Reversal Squad. Come to think of it, try very hard not to splinch. It may take them a while to get through Hogwarts' heightened security, and it can be very disconcerting to be separated from a leg or arm for any length of time.

"Of course, you won't be able to Apparate out of this room, and you have only until the stroke of eleven before the anti-Apparation spells will once again blanket the infirmary, but I have every confidence that the three of you can make progress in the next two hours." Her brows rose a little, and Ron got the distinct impression that she was looking for the same assurances from him.

"Oh, yeah," he lamely said, "two hours should be plenty of time."

McGonagall remained unconvinced. "Very well. And Mr. Weasley, shall we continue our lessons this evening? I thought, perhaps you and Miss Granger could meet me in my Transfiguration classroom at eight."

"Hermione, too?" he asked, surprised. "Uh...sure. We'll be there."

The tutoring session proved harder than Ron had ever expected. Simply explaining the Apparition principles of Destination, Determination, Deliberation wasn't enough, nor were his woefully inadequate descriptions of the turn one was supposed to do in order to Disapparate. Hermione's had always looked a little like a ballet move, and so Ron felt as his students were girls that was probably the best way for them to go as well. He tried to describe the sensations they should be feeling; the tingling and the squeezing of every bit of him, the nausea and giddiness. Of course, Ron didn't really know how he managed to Disapparate and turn up in roughly the right spot. It had taken a lot of doing just to get it right the first time, and then once he had he just tried to do the exact same thing

over again. He demonstrated a few times, and then Ruby burst into tears and cried out that she'd never do it and she was just a waster.

"But...but we've only just started," Ron said, confused by the girl's theatrics. "And learning to Apparate may very well be the hardest thing you'll ever have to do at Hogwarts. Loads of witches and wizards never even get their licenses, which is why we have the Floo Network, so if you don't, you don't. But let's not give up until we've at least given it a good go, right? I was a slow learner, myself, and I managed. The key, I think, is to believe in yourself. I believe in you," he added for that extra boon of confidence.

After that the girl had beamed at him with her luminous black eyes and full-lipped smile. And while neither Charity nor Ruby managed to Apparate so much as a hair, they both left giggling and waving to their tutor.

Ron felt the session was a success, all told, but when he looked over to Hermione she just glared at him, turned her back, and went on with whatever she and Madame Pomphrey were doing.

She was cool to him over dinner as well, and when Ron tried to ask what he was supposed to have done she changed the subject.

"I'm learning loads from Madame Pomphrey. Loads. Of course, adapting the spells to battle conditions might prove more tricky, and I'll have to carry an assortment of draughts, just in case. There are several that take months to brew, like Milk Flush, so of course there will have to be preparations made." Hermione wasn't really talking to anyone, Ron decided. And she certainly wasn't looking at him.

Once they got up from the table Ginny leaned in close and whispered, "What did you do now, you git?" while wearing an angry glare.

Ron didn't have a chance to respond.

"Hermione, wait a moment," Harry said. "I know you and Ron have a lesson with Professor McGonagall late this evening and it's bound to run into the night, but I was wondering if we could still meet after? In your quarters?"

"Well, certainly," she said somewhat stiffly. "But I thought...why can't we meet now?"

"Funniest thing, actually," Harry said while stifling a grin. "An old friend of Ron's has turned up and has asked to meet you."

"Meet me?" Hermione asked.

"I've an old friend?" Ron asked.

"His name is Amoro. Miguel Amoro."

Hermione's eyes went wide and her jaw dropped. "Miguel Amoro? The Fatologist? You're having me on!"

"Never," Harry said, now smiling broadly.

"Wait," Ron said holding up a hand as if to stop time for a moment so he could catch up. "You've heard of Miguel Amoro? The Portuguese?"

"Is he that Fate bloke who's writing Ron's life's story?" Ginny asked.

"He's what?" Hermione gasped.

"Well, it's never my life's story, but well, he's done some interviews," Ron said, trying not to enjoy the way she looked starry-eyed at him. "There might be a few chapters..."

"He's interviewed Ron and myself," Harry said, "and he'd like to do you, as well. I didn't promise you'd give him the interview, but I did say I'd introduce you."

"Oh, my stars!" Hermione exclaimed. "Do you think he'll autograph my books? I've got all twelve that he wrote – translated, of course-"

"I'm sure he will," Harry said with a chuckle.

"You've got twelve of his books?" Ron said, stunned.

"Of course she does," Ginny grumbled irritably at her brother. "She's Hermione. And the moment she found out she was Fated, what do you expect she did? Don't be a clod!" And then she cuffed his shoulder for good measure.

While Ron moped over his wounded arm and ego, Hermione fluttered around spouting everything she'd ever read about Amoro while Harry led her to McGonagall's office for the interview. For one brief moment all that energy had been focused on Ron. For an instant Ron had glimpsed what he imagined Harry's life to be. No one had every looked at him in awe before. And he'd never felt his heart swell so large. Now, of course, he realized that it wasn't him that she was seeing. It was Amoro.

Oh, what he wouldn't give to be the kind of wizard to make her giddy. At eight that evening Ron went up to Professor McGonagall's office. Amoro had gone already, and when Ron came in he found Hermione sitting in an arm chair opposite the professor, who sat behind her desk. They had been chatting, it seemed, and Hermione stopped talking mid-sentence once Ron was through the door. She gave him a little smile. She looked nervous.

"Ah, Mr. Weasley. Good of you to join us on time. Please, take a seat."

Ron sat in the chair beside Hermione, who was now resolutely staring at the front of Professor McGonagall's desk.

"First, I believe," the Headmistress said, peering at them over her spectacles, "we should define a few things, just so we're clear. No sense speaking two different languages. Miss Granger, would you care to tell the class what you know of Love Magic?"

Hermione wore a smug little grin as she explained: "Love Magic is the most ancient form of magic – older than the pyramids in Egypt, older than the stone circles in this country, older than anything man has ever made that is left standing on the earth. Some say that Love Magic is as old as the mountains, which is, of course, ridiculous

because everyone knows mankind hasn't been around nearly as long as the mountains-

"Wasn't Harry protected with Love Magic?" Ron asked. "Isn't that what scarred him?"

"That's correct," McGonagall said solemnly. "Lily Potter evoked the Ancient Magic when she sacrificed herself. I dare say she didn't even know she was doing it. We don't teach Love Magic anymore, and for good reason. It can be dangerous and unpredictable. And it can be especially cruel when applied to the Dark Arts. But there are some, Mr. Weasley, like yourself, who are instinctively drawn to it. You've probably used it all your life and never really understood what you were doing. Hogwarts should, of course, test all first years for their Love Magic quotient, I've said it to Dumbledore dozens of times over my tenure here, but he saw no point as so few students would even register a level one. And, I suppose, most of the teachers here wouldn't have the foggiest as to what to do with a student with such...abilities."

"Incidentally, Mr. Weasley, I would assume from what Alastor and Remus have explained, that you would be off the Love Magic Quotient scale. Gifted, one might say. Which may explain a little of your other unique ability. Both stem from Ancient Magic, you see?"

"If Love Magic is a gift, then why does Moody want me not to use it?" Ron asked. "He's been trying to get me to find my Pure Magic for ages now."

"Yes, well," McGonagall said, sitting back in her seat. "Many people see the clouding of emotions in magic to be more of a disability than anything else. Because for most emotions are not easily controlled. And, the application for which Mr. Moody was trying to teach was very specific. Mr. Potter, who has very little practical experience with Love Magic, was overwhelmed by it – as would we all be, as none of us are versed in that particular type of magic any longer. It is a shame, Mr. Weasley, that we are not able to properly hone your gifts here. My hope is to help you understand them better, and perhaps to allow you to adapt to Pure Magic when you find it necessary."

"But...are there other people like me?" Ron asked.

"With your Smisurato abilities? I daresay no," McGonagall said decisively. "With your natural inclination toward Love Magic – or Ancient Magic - yes. A few. And, I'd even go so far as to say that most of them – have absolutely no idea why they're not able to control their magic as well as their peers. A few may not be able to control it at all. But, as I've already explained, this is a considerably small percentage of the wizarding population – far too few, I'm afraid, to have garnered any interest for further contemporary studies. Oh, yes, Mr. Weasley, you may consider yourself very much alone in your abilities. But not in other things. For instance, Miss Granger is here with you this evening, and I, of course, will always do my utmost to assist in your education – for as long as that might take."

The way she said that made Ron think he might be old and grey before she'd retire from her post. "Uh...thank you, Professor."

"Very well," she said, rising. "Let us begin."

Ron and Hermione stood, too, and waited as she Disappeared their chairs with a wave of her wand. "Please stand in the center, and backs together. They did as she commanded, though Ron saw the same hesitancy in Hermione that he felt; neither of them knew what to expect. "Very, good. Miss. Granger, please close your eyes and think of a dark color. Just that color, not anything associated with it. See it in your mind's eyes. Imagine it surrounding you."

Ron could feel the heat of her through the back of his shirt, breathing against his back.

"Now, Mr. Weasley, I want you to think of your happiest moment. Then think of only an instant within that moment, and hold it within your mind's eye."

His happiest moment? That was easy – winning the Quidditch match for Gryffindor in fifth year and being carried off the field under a serenade of "Weasley is Our King!" His smile faltered as another image shot past: one of Hermione all battered and bloody and

unconscious in his arms, and Harry collapsed on the cave floor behind him.

"Mr. Weasley, one thought, please. And Miss Granger, the color should be a pleasant one for you. Please pick a dark color that you like and focus on it."

How had she known? Ron wondered. He ventured a tiny peek and found McGonagall glaring at him. Eyes shut tight again, he tried to conjure up the Quidditch match, and suddenly he was remembering the kiss he'd shared with Hermione the night Tonks died. No, no! he schooled. That was a terrible night. Tonks was dead and Lupin went bestial, and Shacklebolt was terribly hurt. Happiest moment, he told himself. The best moment of his life...

And then he saw dark, burnt orange. An autumn orange. The deepest color in his hair.

Now, that couldn't be right. He squeezed his eyes tighter. Kissing Hermione, holding Hermione, touching his lips to her pink, scarred breast. Orange.

This time when he opened his eyes McGonagall was holding her wand out, her own eyes closed, and he and Hermione were enveloped in a shimmering mist. "Focus, Mr. Weasley," she corrected without breaking her own concentration. Ron closed his eyes again.

And once again the Quidditch victory turned into Hermione in his lap, kissing the bloody hell out of him on his mother's living room floor. Was that really the happiest moment of his life? Surrounded by all that grief and sorrow? He shook his head. No, his happiest memory was the Quidditch game where no one died and no one suffered. He pushed the rest out of his mind. And apparently, he pushed back against Hermione as well because she gave a yelp of surprise and he felt her fall away from him. When he opened his eyes McGonagall was glaring at him once more, and Hermione, who had caught herself, was half way across the room.

"What was that for?" she demanded.

He mumbled an apology and didn't look up, knowing she was probably glaring at him, too.

"What is it, Mr. Weasley?"

He shrugged.

"I would prefer you to look at me and speak in response to my questions," McGonagall said tartly.

"Sorry, Professor," he said, meeting her gaze. "I don't know what the problem is."

"Did you think of your happiest moment?"

"Well, I tried to, but other things kept popping in."

"What other things?"

His eyes slid over to Hermione before he even realized it, giving him away.

McGonagall expression didn't change. "You were trying to recall the memory you use for your Patronus, weren't you?" When Ron nodded she continued, "well, much has happened since then. It's very likely that you've a new memory to use."

"No," Ron insisted. "It can't be my happiest moment. I mean, yeah, it was smashing for me, but there were so many horrible things happening then. It just can't be..."

"Mr. Weasley, we don't get to pick and chose which moments in our history to keep or return simply because they're not perfect-" McGonagall began.

"But Tonks died! And Lupin! And Shacklebolt!" He realized his folly immediately from the stern frown on her face. "I'm sorry to interrupt, Professor, but how can my happiest moment be when Tonks died?" It didn't make sense. He shook his head.

"Tonks' death wasn't that moment, I'm certain. But it may very well have coincided with a moment your mind recognizes as being among the happiest in your life. Great joy and great misery often lie side by side. Tear of happiness and tears of grief are just a cord away from each other."

"But Tonks!" Ron said again, and the upset within him began to work its way up into his throat. "We'd become close. I delivered her baby, for Merlin's sake!" That only made him think of Jack, and the grief of losing him as well. He missed Jack terribly. And it wasn't an abnormal attachment!

"Well, this wasn't how I'd planned it," McGonagall said, "but we work with what we're given. It's clear you're in some distress now, so while you've got all those emotions so close force that happy memory up to the surface. It's all right if they share equal space as long as you're looking at that wonderful moment. Now, Mr. Weasley, light the hearth."

He focused on that kiss, which seemed so distant with the grief so close, turned to the fireplace and took aim. "Lumos," he said, and there was a brief shower of sparks that shot up about a meter from the log in the hearth, but nothing more.

"Your emotions can make you stronger, Mr. Weasley, it's your natural state. But only if you use them properly; you can't allow yourself the distraction. Think of Miss Granger in that happy moment and cast the spell!"

He closed his eyes and shoved the grief down and pulled up the feel of Hermione on his lap, his hands in her hair, his lips on her neck. This time the fire did light. So did the tapestry just above the mantle. McGonagall doused it with a flip of her wand and turned to Ron.

"Very nice, Mr. Weasley. That, in essence is what we will continue working on for your remainder of your stay at Hogwarts. Now, one last exercise before we call it a night. Miss Granger, please take Mr. Weasley's hands, if you will."

Hermione joined him as instructed, and took his hands in hers. She was soft and cold between his fingers, and while her hand was slender, her grip was strong.

"Now, the both of you, this is an exercise that I expect you to do every day, whether we meet or not. It's not particularly difficult or taxing, so there will be no excuses. Mr. Weasley, you start first. Say something nice to Miss Granger."

"What?" Ron asked an amused Professor McGonagall.

"You heard me. Say something nice. Don't look at me, boy!"

Disgruntled, Ron turned back to Hermione. He'd been had-over. These were supposed to be legitimate exercises! Hermione's expression was unreadable. And she didn't look as if she was breathing. "Uh..." he said. Something nice, he told himself. Say something she'll want to hear. "Uh..."

"Any day, Mr. Weasley," McGonagall pushed.

It would've been easier to come up with something without the audience, Ron thought grumpily. "Uh...you're very pretty."

Hermione sighed and rolled her eyes. "I think there has to be an ounce of honesty in it, Ron."

"What?" he asked defensively. "You're pretty."

"Yes, and you're brilliant," she snapped dropping his hands. "This is a complete waste of time."

"Wait," he said, and stopped her with a hand to her arm. "Come here." He pulled her back to him, somewhat reluctantly, and he gave her a sheepish grin. "Thank you for coming here tonight. I know that's not a compliment of the seventh order or anything – probably doesn't even rate a one, but it's honest. And yes, I think you're very pretty. You're the prettiest non-veela I've ever known."

She dropped her eyes to hide a grin of her own. "Thank you," she whispered. "And I figure that was a compliment of the fourth order."

"And that," he told her, "is a great compliment for me. Fifth order, I reckon."

Having now completed their assignment, they both looked expectantly at a confused Professor McGonagall. "Yes, well...I suppose that will do. I will never understand your generation, I fear. Good night to the both of you."

Once they were dismissed they went back to Hermione's quarters where Harry and Ginny were already snogging. Harry called it waiting.

"Yes, I can see how long you must've been waiting," Ron said flatly as he assessed the flush face and swollen lips on his sister.

"Never mind that," Hermione said, and settled on the floor in front of the fire. "I've not had any luck in the Horcrux department, but I've had another look at the prophecy, and there are some things that have me unsettled."

"I find the whole blood thing unsettling," Harry grumbled.

"Listen here," she said, and then began reading the poem from a bit of folded parchment: "'The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches,' that's the first line," she said. "What does it tell us?"

"That the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches," Ron said. "Thought it was obvious."

"Shut up," she told him. "It tells us that A – this is before Harry was born, and B – that it is possible to vanquish Voldemort."

There was a general grumble of acceptance of her interpretation, so Hermione continued. "'Born to those who have thrice defied him.' Harry, did your parents thrice defy Voldemort?"

Harry shrugged. "Must've done."

"Might be worth check out," Ginny said.

Hermione nodded. "'Born as the seventh month dies.' That's pretty straight forward. This person with the power to vanquish Voldemort is born at the end of July. No real mystery there. So, then, 'and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal,' is interesting. Voldemort gives the Dark Mark to his followers. But Harry's scar was the result of Voldemort's magic clashing with the Ancient Magic that protected Harry, making Harry most certainly his equal in power – at least at the moment in time. Also, the fact that Voldemort hunted him down and singled him out also can be interpreted as Harry being Voldemort's mark. Voldemort marked him as an adversary metaphorically, and then physically as well."

"What?" Ron asked. "Are you starting to make some of this up?"

"We haven't even gotten to the complicated part yet, Ron. Please keep up." Ron, sufficiently chastised, pulled his legs up and wrapped his arms around them.

"But he will have a power the Dark Lord knows not," Hermione quoted. "Dumbledore assumed this was Harry's ability to love, and perhaps that's what it is."

"Seems so," Harry said. "If love and compassion are completely devoid in him, then it stands to reason that they might be used as weapons against him."

"Yes..." Hermione said, though it was clear she had an alternate interpretation.

"What do you think it means?" Ron asked.

"Later," she said. "Let's move on to the next bit. 'And either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives.' Any thoughts?"

"Yeah, it means Harry's got to kill him, or he's going to kill Harry," Ginny said darkly.

"Or we both snuff it," Harry suggested. "Though I like your way better. Better odds."

"And either must die..." Hermione quoted again. "It says either, not both. Either means one or the other, it never means both. Bring me either the blue quill or the red – you'd bring one or the other, wouldn't you?"

"Suppose I would," Harry said, lightening a little. "So then, one of us will survive?"

"Harry," Hermione said slowly, "let's look for a moment at the last line. "For neither can live while the other survives."

"Meaning either Harry's got to bite it, or Voldemort does," Ron suggested. "Because both can't live at the same time."

"No, actually," Hermione said delicately, "it really doesn't say that. It says live and survive. They're not really the same thing. One suggests sustaining life while the other implies surviving an event. And, as Harry is most certainly alive, as is Voldemort – or at least there's some semblance of life there; he has a body and is moving about. So Harry still lives and Voldemort has survived."

The three of them say silently and waited pondered this new bit of information.

"So, the prophecy is wrong?" Ginny asked, hopeful.

"I don't think so," Hermione said. "The prophecy was cast before Harry was born. And it talks, I believe, about a specific event. An event where Voldemort marked Harry as his equal, where one didn't live while the other survived."

Harry touched his head. "The prophecy has already come true? It's over?"

"I think so," Hermione said. "It's really the only way it makes sense all around. You survived, so therefore Voldemort couldn't live. And he didn't."

"But what good is it if it's already over?" Ginny demanded. "The prophecy is useless! It leaves us back in the dark!"

"That's prophecy for you," Ron quipped.

And then, Hermione read it again for them all to hear:

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches

Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies

and the Dark Lord will mark him as equal,

but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not

and either must die at the hand of the other

for neither can live while the other survives."

"But...then..." Harry said, haltingly. "Then...the prophecy is done with. And the Ministry...it was all for nothing...and Sirius...he didn't have to die..."

End of chapter 16

Chapter 17 – Just Fine

Ron and Harry had grown into men, and Harry's invisibility cloak was meant to conceal just one man at a time. So, as the two of them tried to squeeze beneath it, going so far as to huddle together with their arms around one another, it was probably natural that Ginny and Hermione would burst into laughter that their trainers and jeans showed out the bottom.

"You're just not eleven years old anymore," Hermione said still giggling. "It'll have to be one of you alone, I'm afraid."

Ron ripped off the cloak, his hair running every which way. "We need a potion or something. Can't you come up with one?"

She took this question as a personal challenge. For two days and nights Ron saw her only at meals, and even then she was distracted and irritable. When at last she knocked on the door to his quarters Ron didn't even care that it was nearly two in the morning. Her huge smile was worth being startled out of a deep sleep.

"It's not a true Invisibility Potion," she told him and Harry, who was still abed and trying to push his glasses on his face. "It has more of a chameleon effect. And as long as you stand perfectly still most people should simply over-look you. I hope. There are two doses in there. They should last about twenty minutes, so don't take it until you absolutely need to. The effect should be instantaneous.

Ron sniffed at the neck of the bottle. "Smells like feet."

"It should taste about as good," Hermione admitted. "I was afraid to tamper with the recipe. I've never made Noseemee Draught before. If it works well I can see about tweaking the flavor."

"Brilliant," Harry said through a yawn. He kicked off his covers and crawled out of bed. "Once again, Hermione, you're brilliant."

She beamed. "Right, then. Off to bed."

For an instant Ron fantasized about Hermione climbing into his bed and him crawling in after her, of the two of them lying close under the covers, of her arms around him and his lips on her neck...

"Not for us, mate," Harry told Ron, a consolatory hand to his shoulder. "And you might want to put some clothes on."

The two of them crept along the deserted corridors, though they both tried not to look as if they were creeping. They had a right, after all, as teachers-of-a-sort, to be out after hours. Even Filch wouldn't be able to get them into trouble if he discovered them. But their presence in the halls at that time of night would be difficult to explain away, and breaking into the Headmistress' office certainly would be a serious offense. As they got closer and closer to the giant statue that would let them in, Ron became more nervous. Perhaps insisting he go along with Harry had been a mistake. At the moment Ron couldn't even guess what he'd been thinking. But insist he had. And Hermione had worked hard to see that he got his way.

"Discipline," Harry whispered once they were facing the grinning gargoyle. It shifted to one side with a grinding sound of stone on stone. Then, the two of them rode the circular stone staircase up to the office. The last time Ron had been in there Umbridge had been Headmistress, and her Slytherin thugs had caught Harry and them trying to contact Sirius through the Floo Network. With the pink and kittens gone, not much had changed since Dumbledore was Headmaster, Ron thought, though he hadn't spent a great deal of effort taking in the ambiance. The portraits were still hanging on the walls, mostly snoring away. The massive desk still sat in its place and various tables still littered the room with baubles and trinkets. There was a flowery rug on the floor Ron was fairly sure Dumbledore wouldn't have chosen – all pink and yellow and purple. And there were fresh flowers in vases here and there that made the room smell like a garden.

Harry, too, took a moment to study their surroundings. His gaze stopped on a particular portrait, and Ron realized with some horror that it was Dumbledore's. The old wizard sat in a large chair; head off to one side, slumbering away as if he hadn't been killed almost a year ago. Harry, too, seemed upset to see him.

"I'll look over here," Ron suggested, and this broke the trance Harry had been caught in. He went to the desk.

The books seemed to run the gambit from biographies and histories to wizardly romances. There was one called Raising Wizards and Witches by Jasper Callingsby, which led Ron to believe that none of them had belonged to the previous Headmaster.

"She's probably stowed his stuff away somewhere else," Harry said after a couple of minutes. "This is just rubbish."

"Well, it has been a while," Ron said. "She's had plenty of time to move in and make herself at home, hasn't she?"

Harry grunted. "I just...I can't imagine shoving his things aside. When McGonagall was acting Headmistress she didn't change a thing."

"I rather think that's because she didn't want to get too comfortable in that chair."

The two of them froze at the sound of the all too familiar voice. They turned and saw the painted Dumbledore sitting up now, and smiling genially at the two of them.

"Like the way it feels?" Dumbledore asked Harry, and nodded slightly at the chair he sat in. "Rather suits you, I think."

Harry, of course, leaped away from it, breathing as if he'd run a marathon.

"And hello to you, Mr. Weasley. It's good to see you again."

"A-and you," Ron said, mechanically. "You look...well."

This made Dumbledore chuckle. "Thank you. Now, what could you two possibly be up to? As much as I enjoy the visit, I can't help but think that neither of you have permission to be in here. Did Minerva give you the password?"

Harry's cheeks flushed red, and he nodded.

"Then it must be Order business," Dumbledore said, and he sucked thoughtfully on his cheek.

A light went on in Harry's eyes. He started to babble. "The Horcruxes! We've found the cup, but not the locket, and are you sure the snake is a Horcrux? We can't find anything about them at all, and we don't know where to even begin to look. And the Death Eaters are gaining strength and taking control and they're hunting down Order members and...and..."

"Tonks is dead," Ron supplied.

"Yes, Tonks," Harry said quickly. "But we need to find the other three Horcruxes and can you help? And how could you trust Snape? All those time I warned you that he was up to no good! I told you he was working for the other side, that he was not to be trusted, and you believed him over me! And you didn't even defend yourself up there in the ramparts that night! You just let him come at you! And you froze me! I could've helped you! I could've saved you!"

"Harry," Dumbledore said calmly. "You understand, of course, that I'm not your Dumbledore. I'm simply his portrait."

Red faced and watery-eyed, Harry turned from the painting. "Yes," he said bitterly.

"You can help us, though," Ron said. "You know what he knew."

"I'm afraid I'll be of less help than you think," the painting said.

"Where are his things?" Harry demanded, his voice sharp and his face dark. "His notes and parchments? Where's his journal? The things he was working on when he got himself killed?"

"Now, Harry, there's no need—" began Dumbledore in an admonishing tone.

"Tell me where they are!" Harry yelled, cutting off the painting's patient scold.

"That one's got a temper," said Phineas Nigellus' portrait appreciatively, sitting up now, and no longer pretending to be asleep. "He's turned darker since even I last saw him at my old home. Very nice..." he hissed.

It was clear Harry was disturbed to hear what Nigellus said, though he tried to ignore him. "I need his work," Harry said again to the painted Dumbledore. "Do you know where it is?"

Dumbledore sat back in his chair. "I do."

"Will you tell me?" Harry asked. It was as polite as he was going to get, Ron feared.

"Please?" Ron added. "It's like we're reinventing the wand. Whatever help you can give us...or the other Dumbledore can give us..." Ron almost said 'the dead Dumbledore.'

"I daresay the best help I can give the both of you now is to tell you that someone is coming," the painted Dumbledore said, looking at the door with some concern.

Harry bolted to Ron and thrust the potion in his hand. "Quick!" he whispered.

Ron pulled out the cork and swallowed three times, then handed the flask to Harry and gagged as the flavor hit him.

Harry just finished molting into the red phoenix tapestry behind them when the door swung open and a small, dark brown, ancient-looking witch peered in the room. "I heard voices," she said, casting her dark eyes quickly around the office, and venturing only a step or two inside.

"I'm sure you did, Headmistress," Dumbledore said happily.

Her gaze slipped right over Ron and Harry, though Ron was sure she could hear his heart hammering in his chest. "You chatting up the

other portraits?" she asked, no humor in her voice. "I had another of those wearisome dreams. You haven't gotten wind of any Death Eater activity tonight, have you?"

"I haven't," Dumbledore said. "It's been a quiet night, all told."

"I can't tell you how anxious this business has made me. Dreams of Death Eaters on school grounds, trespassers in my office, fires." Headmistress Waddington sighed and hugged herself. "No alarms from the other Ministry officers, I take it?"

"Not a one," Dumbledore told her. "Three o'clock and all is well."

She ran a hand through her bristly steel-grey hair and sighed. "I don't suppose that should surprise me. I'm not a seer, after all. And still..." She looked over the room again, her eyes landing on the bookcase where Ron had been rummaging. "Someone's been in here."

"Yes," Dumbledore agreed. "Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley. They were looking for my things, I'm afraid."

"What?" Waddington said, grasping the front of her night robe. "How? How did they get in here?"

"They didn't say," Dumbledore said vaguely. "But rest assured Headmistress, that I did not tell them my notes and journals were placed in the Gryffindor Tower basement, or that the password was my favorite candy. The boys meant no harm to you or this school, Claudia. They're simply inexperienced and over zealous, as young wizards tend to be."

"I can't have teachers breaking in to my office, Dumbledore!" she bellowed. "And what if they hadn't been just after your parchments? What if their intent was much more sinister?"

"Then the gargoyle never would've jumped aside," Dumbledore plainly said. "And the portraits would've been in an uproar. Harry Potter is no stranger to this chamber. And, as you know, he may very well be the only thing standing between the rest of the wizarding world and Voldemort."

She physically shuddered at the name. "Please! Dumbledore! I will not have that name spoken within these walls!"

"As you wish, Headmistress," Dumbledore said pleasantly. "This is your school after all."

"Yes," she said. "It is. I shall have to have a talk with those boys. They must be made to understand that they're here as a favor from Minister Scrimgeour and as teachers they must behave as befits their station. Can you imagine if the students got wind that Harry Potter broke into the Headmistress' office? Mayhem, Albus! Anarchy!"

"I completely agree. Harry should be far more careful. Stunts like this are far too reckless, and I'm afraid it's a habit I never quite had the heart to break him of when I was in your place," Dumbledore said with a fond smile. "It rather reminds me of my own misspent youth, and at times I found the nostalgia overwhelming."

"Oh, hodge-podge," Waddington said. "You and I both know you never over-indulged that boy. You had neither the luxury of time or safety for that. No, Harry Potter is as you already described: reckless, head-strong, and blinded by his inexperience and youth. Why he didn't simply knock on my door if he wanted something—"

"Oh, Claudia, we both know he never could have done that. You're the Ministry's extension here at Hogwarts, and the Ministry has never once tried to hide its desire to use and exploit young Mr. Potter. And furthermore, you and I and he knows that you would never give him my papers—"

"We agreed on that," she said quickly. "You said yourself that there was far too much there for a boy to fully understand, and that that kind of knowledge could lead him astray."

"I did say that, yes. If only he had at his disposal an aptitude for studious book learning, a sensibleness that borders on wisdom, an open and true heart, and endless courage in addition to the natural charisma and leadership skills he already possesses. Why then, I believe, he would have all the necessary components to not only

understand what my exploits can tell him, but also use the information properly. Oh, Merlin! What ever could that be?"

And then Dumbledore's portrait kneeled down on his painted floor and peered under the Headmistress' desk. When she went around and bent low to investigate for herself, Harry pulled Ron out the door with him. They scurried down the stairs three and four at a time, streaked down the corridor, and into the next hall. It wasn't until they were safely down the next set of stairs that Harry slowed up enough for Ron to catch his breath. It had been a long time since he'd played Quidditch, and his body was no longer built for that kind of speed.

"Where's Gryffindor's basement?" Harry asked, doubled over and breathing hard.

Ron shrugged. "Have you got your Maurader's Map?"

"Good thinking!" Harry said and bolted off again. Ron followed, but now at a slower clip.

He caught up with Harry in their quarters. By that time Harry had emptied the entire contents of his trunk and pulled out the folded bit of parchment. He studied it carefully. Then, disgusted, he threw the map aside.

"What was I thinking! Of course he's not going to give us any straight help!"

"What's wrong?" Ron asked, holding the stitch in his side.

"We're in a castle! Castles don't have basements!" Harry turned around and kicked his trunk, and then limped around in circles with his hands on his hips. "SON OF A BITCH!"

Ron was stunned by his friend's reaction. In fact, Harry had been acting erratic from the first moment they stepped foot in the Headmistress' office.

"He was always doing that! Always talking in riddles, or else saying that it was nothing that I should worry about – like he could protect

me! He couldn't even protect himself, could he? Didn't even try!" Harry was raving as he paced the room, and Ron began to feel that small, snake-like disturbance deep within his well again.

"Uh...Harry-"

"In the basement! HA! Password is 'sherbet lemon!' HA! He lied to us just as surely as he lied to her! And she's the new headmistress! She's him!"

"Harry, hang on!"

But Harry didn't let up, and the more he carried on then more uncomfortable Ron became until he pulled out his wand and yelled: "Petrificus totalus!" He hadn't wanted to freeze Harry, and when his friend's whole body went stiff and toppled over backwards Ron couldn't help but eek out a meager, "Sorry, mate, but you were getting a bit scary there."

Harry was going to kill him for sure. Ron could still feel the energy being roped out of him as if something inside him was uncoiling. Ron leaned down close to Harry, but was careful not to touch him.

"Listen, mate. I need you to hear this. You're siphoning off energy from me, and I don't think you're even aware that you're doing it." There was a tremor inside Ron, and then he felt the rope of energy snap, and once again he was left alone. "It's not the first time this has happened," Ron continued, as calm and reassuring as he could be. "And I'm not completely convinced, but Moody seemed to think that maybe, when you get like that, you might be able to do things that you don't intend. Even without your wand. And, well, I thought you should know."

Ron unfroze him, and braced himself for the blow that was sure to come. Only, it didn't. Harry collapsed like a pile of noodles on the floor and stared up at the rough wood ceiling. "My Uncle Vernon's sister...making the glass disappear in the reptile house that one time...I did a lot of stuff without a wand."

"Yeah, only now you're tapping into me, see, and so, well, it's not just blowing up your auntie – it's blowing up your auntie!" Ron told him, somewhat relieved that Harry saw the seriousness of the situation, and was taking it so well. "Do you think it could be something like what I've got? When my emotions get in the way of my casting?"

Harry shrugged. "I wasn't trying to cast anything." And then his face went dark, and Ron knew he'd remembered why he was so angry just a minute ago. "If he wasn't going to tell us where his notes and things are, then why did he bother with the 'Gryffindor basement' business?" His voice was hard again, but now, at least Harry seemed in better control.

"It's just a portrait," Ron reminded him.

"It's Dumbledore's portrait," Harry countered. "Hermione will know what it means." And he made to jump up, but Ron stopped him.

"You can't wake her, not now. This is the first sleep she's had in days, and it's not even morning yet."

Harry eyed him, but then relented. "Fine. Suppose we could use some sleep, too."

"And how!" Ron helped his friend up, and they changed back into their night clothes.

"One thing, though," Ron said, after they'd climbed into their respective beds. "Waddington didn't flinch when he said Gryffindor basement, did she? Suppose she thinks there is one?"

"It's not on the map," Harry said, and then slowly added as the realization hit: "but then, neither's the Room of Requirement!"

"Or, maybe it's a code between them," Ron suggested. "Maybe he was being sneaky and telling her we were still in the room."

Harry shook his head. He didn't think so. "She thinks it's in Gryffindor Tower's basement. Is there a section of the catacombs that goes under Gryffindor? Or part of the dungeons?"

"Harry, if there are places in this castle that even the Marauders didn't know about, places that are uncharitable, well, Hogwarts would be an excellent place to hide something, like, say, a Horcrux or two."

Harry gave him a very satisfied smile. "My thoughts exactly."
The following morning over breakfast Harry filled Hermione and Ginny in on what he and Ron had discovered. Hermione immediately latched on to the possibility that there might be some riddle to be solved.

"Basement," she said to herself. "I wonder if it there's some alternate meaning."

"Yeah," Ron quipped, "it means pass the marmalade."

She scowled at him.

"No, really. Pass the marmalade."

She shoved the jar in his direction. "Basement suggests a below grade room – not a dungeon or a cellar, but a room."

"What's the difference between a cellar and a basement?" Ginny asked, somewhat cattily. "I mean, who uses the word basement, anyway? Aren't cellars basements?"

Ron couldn't help but notice the tone in his sister's voice. He looked back and forth between his girlfriend and his sister as he slathered the marmalade generously over his scone. Had they fought? They never fought. Well, rarely.

Hermione noticed, Ron decided, but she ignored Ginny's bite. "All cellars are basements, but not all basements are cellars. The basic difference, I believe is that a cellar is a place where things are stored, where as a basement is just a room."

"You're sure?" Ginny asked, pointedly. "Because, if I'm not mistaken, Hufflepuff's common room is located in the basement. Of course, you know best."

Hermione pursed her lips. "Look, I didn't mean it, Ginny. And anyway, I already apologized!"

Harry, having caught on to what was transpiring between the girls looked to Ron for clarification. Ron just shrugged as Ginny turned a cold shoulder to Hermione and stabbed at her eggs.

"Oh, you're just as bad a Ron," Hermione snapped, and then stood and stormed away from the table.

Both Ron and Harry looked at Ginny expectantly, but the only explanation she offered was: "She's such an insufferable know-it-all," muttered scornfully around a bite of bacon.

After another unsuccessful class that morning, Ron found Hermione in the library. She offered him a little smile when she saw him and he took the seat next to her.

"I looked for you in the infirmary," he whispered, leaning a little closer to her than necessary. They'd both been busy recently, and he'd missed her.

"I took the afternoon off," she whispered back.

"Hardly," he said with a quiet scoff, and a critical eye at the mountain of books beside her. "Looks like you've been working hard as ever."

"Just trying to figure out our basement quandary. Ginny was right about Hufflepuff, but it's hardly under Gryffindor Tower. I do think I'm on to something, though."

"Really?" Ron asked, and glanced over her notes. Hermione had impossibly neat handwriting; all her loops and lines were incredibly consistent. Another thing he marveled at about her.

"I'm not finished researching," she said quickly and pulled the parchment away. "I'll explain it all tonight."

"Right, then," Ron said, and relaxed back in the chair, rested his elbows on the arms, and laced his fingers over his stomach. "Ready for a bite to eat?"

"It's hardly dinner," Hermione admonished.

"I was thinking we could fill that time back in your apartment," Ron said casually, though the grin on his face was anything but. "I think I owe you a compliment or two."

The corners of her mouth turned up, but she didn't look at him. "I believe you've researched of your own, Ron," she said. "Gryffindor and Ravenclaw?"

Right. He'd forgotten. "Oh, all right."

She helped him find the most likely books, and sort them into piles on the table opposite her. She gave him a sheet of parchment, a quill, and a smug little smile that turned coy. Ron's heart jumped a little.

When she went back to her own reading, Ron pulled the first book into his lap and began to go through it. Table of contents...Ravenclaw family tree...page 302. He flipped to the back of the book and stared at the woodcut that started the chapter. It was so old it barely moved anymore. The tall, slender witch wore light robes and had long, light hair, a heart-shaped face, and held...what was that? Not a wand, surely. A key? A sausage? He read the first page about Rowena Ravenclaw's childhood, but kept glancing back at the picture. He nudged it with his thumbnail, hoping to irritate her into shifting a little, but she remained in the same haughty pose holding...a pencil?

It was an hour of scribbling notes and bookmarking passages before Hermione finally looked up from her research and announced it was, finally, dinner time. It was then that Harry found the two of them, having just finished with his students.

"Hungry?" Hermione asked him.

He nodded while smirking at the two of them.

"What?" Ron demanded.

"Lupin would be proud," Harry said with a grin. As the three of them were leaving the library Harry muttered to Ron: "Wonder when you'll go and make Moody proud, eh?"

That night, after a successful lesson with McGonagall, the three of them met in Hermione's quarters. Ginny had her final Quidditch practice before the last game of the year – and there was no way Gryffindor was about to allow Hufflepuff their first victory since Cedric Diggory won the House Cup the year dementors were at the school and Harry had fallen off his broom. Ron wasn't completely sure, but Hermione seemed in better spirits when Harry told them Ginny wouldn't be joining them.

"Gryffindor Tower does have a basement," Hermione said, and then spread out Harry's map between the three of them. "Here." She pointed to the large space labeled "Kitchens and Auxiliary." There were about a hundred tiny little dots scurrying around with names like Sniggles and NotchEar and Loam.

That didn't seem right to Ron. "They've hidden Dumbledore's things in the kitchens?"

"Of course!" Harry exclaimed, and smacked himself in the head. "Why didn't I think of that before?" Then, he turned and called out: "Dobby!"

Instantly a small creature appeared wearing an assortment of knitted socks, trousers and multicolored hats. Obviously, the novelty of clothes hadn't worn itself out on the house elf.

"Harry Potter, sir! Oh, how wonderful for Dobby to see you, sir! So handsome, you've become! Such an honor for Dobby to be called by you! Dobby is glad to know Harry Potter is once again at Hogwarts!" He bowed so low his hats fell off, and he quickly gathered them, stacked them, and balanced them on his tiny, bald head once more.

"Thank you, Dobby," Harry said genuinely. "It's good to see you as well."

"Really, sir?" Dobby asked before Harry could get another word out. "Honestly, truly? Did Harry Potter...miss Dobby?" The house elf's big blue eyes stared longingly, hopefully into Harry's.

"I did," Harry said, and Dobby erupted into laughter and cartwheels.

"Harry Potter missed his Dobby! Gone for half a year, Dobby thought Harry Potter had forgotten, thought Harry Potter was...upset...with his Dobby." The elf's ears fell, and he looked worriedly at Harry.

"No, no. I'm not upset with you, Dobby! Not at all! In fact, I've got a special mission for you."

Dobby's eyes went wide and his jaw dropped. "A mission...for Dobby? Dobby will do his very best, sir; lay down his life for Harry Potter!"

"No need for that," Harry assured.

"Let's not be hasty," Ron quipped. Hermione elbowed him in the gut.

"Dobby, do you know where they put Dumbledore's notes and journals and things after he died?"

Dobby's over-large eyes immediately filled with tears, his lips trembled and then clamped shut. He threw himself on the floor and began pounding his face into it. Harry grabbed him and held him by the back of his wool trousers. Thus suspended, Dobby gave Harry a grateful smile. "Oh, thank you, sir!"

"So, I take it that you do know the location of Dumbledore's stuff, but you can't tell me." Harry sized up his little elf. "That's all right. Can you get in there yourself and bring everything to me?" Dobby began to struggle to beat himself against the floor he could not reach. "All right!" Harry said. "Enough of that. Dobby, I have a password. Would that help you get in to the room?"

Dobby opened one eye and looked up at his idol, and then the other opened and he gazed at Harry with such adoration Ron thought the elf might try to kiss him. He nodded vigorously.

"Brilliant!" Harry said and set Dobby on the floor again. "The password is 'sherbet lemon.' Dobby, please go to the secret place and bring Dumbledore's stuff here."

"Gladly!" Dobby said, and then disappeared.

The three of them looked at each other. Then Ron asked: "You think this is what Dumbledore had in mind when he said 'Gryffindor's basement?'"

Harry shrugged. Hermione looked sadly down at the mound of parchments in her lap. "But I had so many theories," she said. "I've all this research." And then she looked enviously at Ron's books and parchments.

"Well, I suppose I should..." Ron pulled the first book off his pile and opened it to the woodcut for Harry and Hermione to see. "Here's what I was able to find about Rowena Ravenclaw." Then, he laid out a parchment he'd quickly sketched her family tree on, before picking up a second parchment and reading from his notes. "She was from the fens, which is commonly known, but one of the books said she was a descendent of Horace Wastleman, the famous Dark Ages wizard who drove the Vikings out of Wales. One book said she grew up on ancestral lands near the sea, and another said she was educated abroad – which might work if the writer wasn't from Wales. Every book agreed, though, that she was a real looker: blond and trim with a real handsome face. Of course, we know she was clever and wise; these are the Ravenclaw traits. But she is also credited with creating the Hogwarts ever-changing floor plan."

"That was in *Hogwarts: A History*," Hermione grumbled.

Ron ignored her mood. "There was one book that suggested she had a brief love affair with Slytherin, and that after that her best friend Helga Hufflepuff would have nothing to do with her. But I don't know how that helps us. She had one daughter, who had one son, who had

three children. I've made up the family tree as best as I could, though some of the books called people by different names. It was a thousand years ago. Things tend to get a bit sketchy."

"Do you know who her current descendents are? Does she have any?" Hermione asked. "If she has descendents, then maybe there are relics. Like Mrs. Smith who had Hufflepuff's cup and Slytherin's locket."

Ron sighed. "I was only able to trace the Ravenclaw line through the eighteenth century." Hermione, no doubt would've already found out Helga's living relatives' addresses and sent them owls. He looked thoughtfully at her. She was gifted when it came to scouring a library. "Hey, Hermione...maybe, if you're not too busy tomorrow, you could take an hour and help me look?"

Her face lit up. "You actually want me to do research with you?"

"Well sure," Ron said. "Look at all I was able to find out today, and I was only there for an hour. Imagine what I can find if we work together!"

"Don't you mean: 'what we can find?'" she asked, none too sweetly.

"Well...yeah, that's what I meant, of course." He glanced down at the woodcut again, and realized Harry had been staring at it. "Reckon short wands were all the rage back then?" he asked, referring to the rod Ravenclaw was holding.

"That's never a wand," Hermione said, bluntly. "Is it?"

"Looks like a sausage," Harry commented.

"That's what I thought!" Ron exclaimed.

"It's a scepter," Hermione said slowly, leaning close and studying the image. Ron could see down the front of her top from this position, and he was mesmerized by the shadow of softly rounded cleavage. He missed a lot of what she said after that.

Harry's voice broke into his reverie. "But aren't scepters used by royalty? There are no royal wizards or witches. Are there?"

"Scepters," Hermione said, "can be used by anyone. Wizards' scepters tend to be more than the ornamental symbol of power though. They're magical, of course. Ron, did you find any mention of Ravenclaw having a scepter?"

He shook his head, and tried like mad not to look at her chest. Heat flamed up his neck and cheeks. "There was something..." He pulled out one of the books on the bottom, and flipped through it. It didn't look right, so he picked up the next book up in the pile. Then he found the other woodcut. It was just as lifeless as the first. "Oh...no, I suppose not. They call it a rod, not a scepter."

"A scepter is a rod, Ron." She pulled the book into her own lap and studied the new woodcut. It was of a Rowena Ravenclaw that looked quite a bit different from the other image, but still with long, flowing light hair, a heart-shaped face, and a delicate hand holding...well, Ron supposed it could be a scepter.

"There's more...can't you see? Right here." Hermione pointed to the rod with her nail. "They're runes."

Harry and Ron leaned in closer. "That bunch of lines?" Ron asked. "Aren't they there to make it look like wood?"

"She's right!" Harry said, breathy and excited. "Smack me with a broom, she's right! Can you read it? What does it say?"

Hermione studied it for a moment, and then shook her head. "I need a magnifier and better light. And my Runes books. Oh, this is exciting!" She hopped up from the floor, collected Ron pile of research, and dashed out – presumably to head back to the library.

"And another night without a snog," Ron lamented.

Harry chuckled. "Yeah, and my girl's out playing Quidditch. We live in strange times, mate."

There came a knock and the boys looked at each other and then the door. Harry jumped up to answer it. McGonagall stood in the corridor, half-turned away with a hand covering her eyes.

"Professor?"

She started at Harry's voice, peered past him into the room and sighed in relief. "Mr. Potter," she began and then caught a glimpse of Ron. "And Mr. Weasley, I see. You're the wizard I was looking for. You've a visitor."

"I do?" he asked as he stood. "Are you sure?"

"Well, of course I'm sure, Mr. Weasley. I haven't taken leave from my senses! Remus Lupin is waiting for you in my office – oh, my stars!"

Before she'd even finished her sentence Ron had dashed past her and down the hall. Lupin was there! In the castle! Just corridors away!

He nearly knocked over a suit of armor out for its evening constitutional down the seventh floor corridor, but he managed to twist and miss it. Several of the paintings protested his speed, but he kept it up until he reached McGonagall's office, winded. He pushed open the door.

Lupin sat in the armchair opposite the desk, and a small bundle of blankets squirmed on his lap. When Lupin saw him his eyes went soft, and he managed a weak smile. "You came so quickly," he said. "Am I forgiven, then?"

"Forgiven?" Ron echoed. There was nothing to forgive. "You all right? Is he all right?"

Lupin nodded and offered up his son. Ron crossed the room in three steps and gathered the baby against him. Relief flooded through him, and gratitude, and a mix of dozens of other emotions that Ron didn't even know the names of. Little Jack was pink as ever, with a little green zebra stripes thrown in for giggles. He cooed and wagged his fists in the air as Ron kissed his head. Jack's weight felt good against Ron's chest again, felt right in his arms.

"Missed you," Ron whispered to him.

"I went to number 12," Lupin said quietly. He looked exhausted, and many of the wounds he'd sustained the night Tonks died didn't seem to have healed properly. His clothes were dirty, his hair greasy and limp. "We were there two nights before I realized the manse wasn't being lived in. I went to the Burrow petrified that something had happened."

"It's not safe out there anymore," Ron told him. "Death Eaters."

Lupin nodded. "They found us near the Muggle town of Workington. I can't imagine how they knew where to look, but we barely made it out. I was a fool to think I could protect Jack on my own. And it damn near cost us everything." His scarred, bruised, scabbed face was molted with emotion, and difficult to read. "Ron...I came back because of the Death Eaters, but I came to Hogwarts because of you. I've always been a solitary man, and the few friends I had were my family. And now...I have that little man. He depends on me for everything. I can't go it alone."

Lupin sighed, and stared sightless at something over Ron's shoulder. "You're seventeen, and I know it's wrong to ask, but I also know you love Jackie the way I do. The way a father does. I can see it right now in your eyes. And I need help." Lupin took a deep breath and pushed himself up from the chair. "Ron..."

"Yes," Ron said.

"Ron, I want to asked you-"

"Yes."

Lupin cocked his head to one side. "You don't know what I was going to-"

"I do," Ron told him, patting Jack's tiny bottom. "And I'm eighteen now. And yes."

"What I'm asking," Lupin began again, and took a few slow steps toward Ron and the baby, "I want you to think about it-"

"There's no need. I'm saying yes."

"Ron, you can't possibly know the lifetime commitment-"

"Remus," Ron said. It was the first time he'd used his given name, and it stunned Lupin into silence. "Something has happened between us that time won't change. We could stand here a hundred years from now and there would still be a connection. Because of Tonks. And because of Jack." Ron glanced down at the infant fisting and unfisting his tiny fingers. "I don't need to think about anything, and we don't need to talk about what we both already know."

"We need not speak about it, if you like," Lupin said. "But as you've said yes...well, then, once again I find myself in your debt-"

"There are no debts between friends," Ron told him.

Lupin's eyes went wide. "I told your father that very thing once. Ever so long ago." He turned then, and gazed out the narrow window. It was a clear night, and Ron could see dozens of stars just in that small patch of sky. "No words then. A gentlemen's pact."

Lupin took up his old professor's lodgings in Gryffindor Tower, and Ron helped him get settled in. He showed Lupin how to fashion a cradle out of a drawer and a towel before he went back to Hermione's apartment. He stopped in the doorway, and for a moment Ron thought he'd accidentally walked into the wrong room. Dozens of stacks and piles of journals, parchments and books created a labyrinth in which even more of Dumbledore's trinkets and gadgets and paraphernalia were placed. Things whirled and whizzed and bubbled all around. Now Ron remembered: this is what Dumbledore's office had looked like.

"Someone there?" It was Harry's voice, though it sounded buried.

"You there?" Ron called into the mess.

Harry stood then, and a tower of books fell over. "It'll take us forever to rummage through this! Where's Hermione? We need reinforcements!"

"We need a rubbish bin. Harry, Dobby didn't bring all of this did he?"

"It's still coming," Harry told him. And then he seemed to really get a good look at Ron. "How's Lupin?"

"Fine," Ron said. "They're both fine. Was touch and go for a while with the Death Eaters and all, but McGonagall has them installed in his old quarters, so everything's fine now."

Harry grinned at him. "You look like you're fine now, too."

"Yeah, well..." Ron looked over the room again to keep from meeting Harry's gaze. He already felt the heat in his cheeks and he didn't want his blush to get any worse. "McGonagall complained, I guess, that Hogwarts is becoming a bit of a hotel. It's getting harder and harder for her to justify new boarders with the new Headmistress. But I suppose she'll manage."

Just then Ginny burst into the room.

"Ron!" she called, "Lupin's here! Pansy Parkinson saw him walk up from Hogsmeade with his baby! Though, to hear her say it you'd think he brought plague and pestilence with him instead."

"I've seen him," Ron told her.

She deflated a little when she realized her news wasn't going to throw Ron into a fit, and turned a sultry gaze on Harry. "Hiya, Harry."

Harry smiled at her, which, of course, caused Ron to roll his eyes and give a hugely exaggerated sigh. "Enough of that," Ron told them.

Ginny didn't seem to hear him. "Practice went well..." she told Harry in a deep, husky voice that Ron couldn't believe was coming out of his sister. "I tried that move you showed me...the other night." Harry swallowed.

"Oh, for casting out loud! Knock it off!" Ron shouted.

Ginny's gaze on Harry didn't waver, and Harry didn't seem to notice Ron was in the room. The two of them had gone all still, and Harry was starting to turn a little red, and all of this was making Ron very uncomfortable.

"Right, then," Ron said, and collected an arm full of whatever journals were closest to him. As he left, he caught sight of Harry rushing to Ginny, and their heated embrace. Thankfully the door was thick and solid, and his ears didn't have to burn with what surely came next. He found Hermione in the library, of course, buried up to her chin in books. She looked startled when she saw him. Apparently his recent visits hadn't changed her expectation of him yet. He quickly explained about Lupin, and then Ginny's abrupt appearance, and the mountains of Dumbledore's things that now filled her quarters. The latter delighted her. She pulled a journal from Ron's hand and headed to one of the old library tables to examine it. The script was long and slanty, and the parchment inside the loose bindings was old and yellowed around the edges.

"This is a personal journal," she said, enthralled with what lay before her. "I'm reading Albus Dumbledore's personal journal."

"Maybe he's got some old drawers you can fawn over, too," Ron quipped, and this earned him a glare.

She closed the book and slid it across the table to him. "You can look through those," she told him. "I'm still researching the runes from that engraving. But I do want a chance to pour through those later." Hermione looked at the journal the way Ginny had looked at Harry.

"Great," Ron said.

Hours later Ron was about to crawl out of his skin. Never had he thought journals could be so dull – though now he knew why he'd never kept one. Hermione had discovered the meaning of two of the symbols, but she stubbornly refused to tell Ron, and instead went in to a quarter-of-an-hour explanation of how one rune can change the

meaning of the others, and it was never prudent to interpret one or two runes without knowing how they all fit together. Like Ron cared. Yawning, he left her to her work and stumbled back to his room.

He undressed, and slipped on a pair of pajama bottoms, crawled into bed, pulled the cover up to his shoulder, and was asleep before he even knew it.

At some point later Hermione woke him as she slipped between his sheets. "Wha'?" he asked, still shaking off unconsciousness, and therefore not having his wits about him yet.

"They made-love in my bed," she said matter-of-factly.

"Huh?"

"Harry and your sister. Ginny. Had sex in my bed."

He collapsed back on to his pillow. "I don't want to hear that!"

"Then don't look at me like you can't understand why I'm here!" she insisted.

"There's a bed over there," Ron told her.

"You really want me in Harry's bed?" she asked, her brows raised. She had a point.

"Come here," he said, and she crawled into his arms, laid her cheek against his bare chest. Her hand roved over his skin and left goose bumps in their wake. When she let loose with a contented sigh Ron's body reacted in a very immediate, very startling way. Hermione didn't seem to notice, though Ron didn't see how she could miss his thumping heart as her ear was practically on top of it.

As he became more awake and aware of his arousal he realized that Hermione was in his bed. With him. And if he wasn't mistaken, she wasn't wearing all that much, either. The hand he had around her back and hip hit skin and a single layer of thin fabric. He ran a finger along an elastic edge. Knickers. Lacey knickers.

Were they going to have sex? Had she come to his bed for that single purpose? Was this how it started? He cleared his throat. "Hermione?"

"Hmm?" She already sounded half asleep.

He supposed if she came for a shag she'd be a lot more...lively. She was warm against him, and soft and smooth...and he liked feeling her breath against him, and the way his body responded to hers when it was so close, and the way he was touching her bum, and the way she was letting him.

"Want to do it?" Hermione asked, shocking him into stillness. She moved her leg that was slung over his and he realized she must have at least an inkling of what his body was doing. She lifted her head and looked at him. There was enough light coming through the diamond patterned windows to see her brows rise in concern. "Did I say something wrong? We don't have to do anything. I just thought...well...that maybe you wanted to."

Ron blinked down at her. He couldn't believe those words were coming out of Hermione – to him! And he didn't know what to say. 'Yes, please,' just didn't seem right, somehow.

"Are you supposed to ask? I thought it was something that...just sort of happened."

"It does, sometimes. And sometimes you talk about it. And sometimes you just sleep." She lay back down, pillowing her head on his chest again, and asked: "This OK? It's been rather a long day, and well, your first time should be special, and I don't think either of us is up for special right now – I know I'm not." She gave a huge yawn, and snuggled down against his him. His lap tightened even further. "I'm glad we can do this," she told him with a sleep voice. "Viktor was never one to just sleep, and Harr-" She stopped herself, and went all stiff next to him.

"Sorry," she whispered. "Sorry, sorry, sorry." Then she pulled away and rolled on to her back. "Sorry I keep doing that. I'm so tired, I keep forgetting what I can or can't say, and to whom..." Her pillow rustled

and Ron knew she turned to look at him. "I'm really sorry. I know it's got to be difficult for you, and well...I'm sorry." And then she rolled away from him and curled the blanket against her chest.

He knew, of course, had known all along, and still, now that she was lying there in her night things, now that he'd kissed her, and knew what it was like to have her warm body pressed up against him, somehow it was harder to deal with the comparisons. Him and Harry and Viktor. And then he thought about what she'd actually said.

"But..." He hesitated, not sure he wanted the answer. Curiosity and the need for a little ego stroking won out. "But you said you were glad that we can just lie here together. You and me. Viktor wouldn't do this with you?"

She peeked at him from over her shoulder. "Uh...no." She flopped on to her back, and gave him a hard look. "You don't have to...do whatever it is that you're doing. I know you don't want to hear about them, any more than I want to hear about Lavender."

"Lavender?" Ron said, bemused. "Now where did that come from?"

"If memory serves, you spent the better part of last year attached to her face," Hermione said cattily.

He shrugged. "You snog better."

A grin inched across her face. "I do?"

"Yup."

"Are you just saying that to get me to snog with you now?"

"I'm hurt that you would even suggest it!" he feigned a wounded heart. "We're going to sleep because you're tired, and because that's something I do better than Viktor." Of course, in his head it had sounded loads better.

Hermione smirked, but she seemed to know what he was saying. "It's one of the many, many things you do better, than...anyone." She

lifted herself up a little, and kissed his cheek, and then the corner of his mouth. "Goodnight, Ron."

When she settled back beside him he whispered a "Goodnight," to her, as well.

And then he stared at her for half the night, wondering how she managed to mention her other lovers and make him feel good about not sleeping with her.

After his class the following day, a tired and now frustrated Ron did some more reading in Dumbledore's journal, and then met his friends for dinner. He was halfway through his bread, cheese, and pickled onion when a tall, blonde girl ambled by with a couple of her friends. When she looked down and saw Ron, her eyes went wide and tripped over her own feet. She recovered quickly, though, and then hurried to catch up with her group. Ron stared after her while a lump the size of the onion on his fork lodged at the back of his throat. For one awful moment he was back in the Cave of Regret, back witnessing all of the horrible things he'd ever done. And while the regret within him now was nothing compared to what he'd experienced that day he and Harry had gone to rescue Hermione, he still recalled how horrible he'd been to that blonde little girl who made him nervous with her sweet smile.

"What was that about?" Hermione whispered across the table at him.

How could he explain Gretta Sweet? How did he tell Hermione he used to torment that girl because she was nice to him? But then, it was Hermione, after all. She probably already knew. They'd all been in the same year, and the school wasn't that big.

Gretta had grown up since he remembered seeing her last. His eyes followed her as she moved away. She was less plump and more curvy. But she was still very fair and her cheeks flushed violently as she rushed past. Ron had to follow.

He caught up with her just inside the doors leading out of the Great Hall, and she looked very like a cornered mouse.

"Could I...could we speak, do you think?" he asked.

She refused to meet his eyes, and said in a defiant, deep voice: "Whatever would you want to speak to me about, Mr. Weasley?"

"Mister? Oh, no," he told her. "I'm not your tutor. I'm still Ron to you."

She shook her head, and the girls she was with began to whisper violently amongst themselves.

Not needing the audience, Ron grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her a couple of feet away. "Look, Gretta, I know I was terrible to you. I was. And you did nothing to deserve it. Not a thing."

"Then why?" she asked, now less sure without her friends there to back her up. She seemed vulnerable, almost shy. "People still call me Gretta the Cow."

"Merlin's beard, I'm sorry, Gretta. Bloody sorry. I don't know why, except that you were..."

"Fat?" she asked pointedly. "Stupid?"

"I was going to say pretty. With your blonde hair and your curls. And I suppose I thought you fancied me, and I didn't know what to do. I panicked. I was thirteen."

"I was thirteen, too," she told him.

"The thing is, you were right, and I was wrong. You tried something and took a risk. We weren't friends, and you didn't know me well at all, and still you smiled at me – ME – a ruddy little pimple. I was the one who was wrong. I didn't know then that a girl's smile is the most precious thing in the world. Had I, I probably would've done this." And then he kissed her cheek. "I'm sorry for that stupid name, and for how I treated you. I regret it. More than you know."

As he turned, she quickly gave him a feather-light peck on the cheek, and then fled back to her gasping, giggling friends. Ron sighed, contented, until he turned and saw Hermione standing by the table,

fuming. Harry leaned over the roast at her, saying something, gesturing with his hands. One of his fists stopped on his chest at roughly the place where Ron's scar was. When Hermione saw this, her eyes softened a little, and she turned back to Ron, no longer furious, but now with an unreadable expression that made his heart beat a little faster and his thighs tingle.

That night she came to his bed again, and neither said anything as she made herself comfortable. Harry was noticeably absent, which led Ron to believe he and Hermione were conspiring together. Not that he minded. Ron rather liked seeing Hermione in her night things, and touching her, and feeling her body against his. He liked the idea of having her close. But he hadn't gotten any sleep the night before and he was a bit twitchy. Ron was so acutely aware of her presence that every time she moved he'd startle out of his doze. And when he jumped, she did, too. He wanted to touch her, wanted to kiss her and slip his fingers under her little top, but she just closed her eyes again every time, and drifted back off to sleep. He spent a lot of time looking at her and then turning over to find a more comfortable position. But at some point in the night Ron had reached his breaking point, and he got up to go to Harry's bed. She stopped him with a hand to his arm. His whole body tingled at the contact.

"Stay," she whispered. "We need to get used to each other. It's new. It'll get better."

"We need a bigger bed," he grumbled, punched his pillow, and flopped over on his belly. "I can't sleep with you staring at me." Or me staring at you, he added silently.

"I'm not staring," she told him, and rolled her eyes. "And you're too tense. Your legs are jumping all over the place."

"Are not!" And then, to make Hermione's point, his left leg spasmed.

She huffed in frustration, sat up. "Come here." She grabbed his leg and pulled it over hers and on to her lap, and then began massaging it.

Ron was thankful to be lying on his belly because his body once again had a mind of its own. "What are you doing?" he demanded, tried to pull his leg away.

"Relaxing your muscles! Now, hold still!"

He was wearing pajama bottoms, so it wasn't like she was really touching his leg, and still Ron thought it was quite possibly the sexiest thing he'd ever experienced. And the odd thing was, he didn't think she felt the same. She was hunched over him, digging hard into his flesh with her thumbs and fingers. Ron watched the play of muscles in her upper arms, her lower arms, her hands. He watched the way her breasts swayed under her sleeveless top. It was dark, yes, but he could still make out their silhouette against the glow in the hearth.

"Ron, you must try to relax-"

He couldn't stand it any longer. With a growl he grabbed her by the shoulders and, as he twisted, he pulled her shrieking down on top of him. She giggled a little as he tried to kiss her, and squirmed until her belly pressed against his need. Then she went still, her eyes rounded. Ron froze, too; terrified to even breathe. Slowly, a knowing smile spread across her face, and one of her hands snaked down his side, across his stomach, and found him. Even through his drawers and flannel, her slow, deliberate strokes - first down and then up again - left him whimpering. He couldn't believe it was happening, couldn't believe it was her touching him that way. He watched her face as she studied him, as her hand smoothed back and forth over him. She leaned down and kissed him deeply.

He grabbed her head roughly; there was no finesse left in him at the moment. He kissed her with his tongue, lips and teeth, with his very soul. But he couldn't get close enough. With a growl of frustration Ron grabbed her shoulders and rolled her beneath him – or he would have, had the bloody bed been wider. The two of them landed on the floor with a resounding thud of body and bone and stone. Hermione, having cushioned his fall, was a little worse for wear. She stared up at him, eyes wide and tearing, lips agape.

"Hermione?" he asked, and began to panic when she didn't immediately respond. He didn't know what to do, besides get off of her. Kneeling beside her Ron watched helplessly until her lungs began to work again and she took her first few gulps of air.

She struggled to sit up, and he helped her. Then she smacked him hard on the shoulder. Coughing and chest heaving she managed to get out: "What the bloody hell's wrong with you?"

"What?"

"Your attempt to kill me, that's what!"

"Hermio-"

"No!" She pushed away any would-be attempts to assure and console. "Don't touch me! You're dangerous!" When she got to her feet she crawled back on to the bed and threw Ron's pillow at him. "I think I'll sleep alone tonight."

"But - but that's my bed!" Ron said indignantly. "You can't throw a bloke out of his own bed!" She made a show of getting comfortable right in the middle of the mattress, and didn't respond. "Hermione! It was an accident, for Merlin's sake! The bloody bed's not big enough!"

"It's perfectly big enough for Ginny and Harry, isn't it?"

"Could we not bring up Harry every time we get in a row?"

"Is this a row? I'm just going back to sleep."

"Well, I'm not sleeping on the floor," Ron told her. She looked suggestively at Harry's empty, made bed. "Oh, no. I will not be put out of my own bed." When he noticed her gaze was a bit lower than his face he looked down and was reminded that his body hadn't yet gotten over its initial excitement. Pajama bottoms did little in the way of hiding anything.

"Would you stop staring at it?"

She looked away self-consciously. "It's out there. It's difficult not to notice."

Heat flared from the soles of his feet all the way to his scalp. He was sure he looked like a tomato...with one very striking difference. "Well, what do you expect? With you fondling-"

"I expect not to be thrown to the floor!"

"Fine, then!"

"Good!" She huffed, crossed her arms, and her breasts squished together and made that wonderful little crease that Ron loved so much. "So, it's all right for you to stare, then?" she asked pointedly.

Ron sighed, and looked away. "If you don't want me to look then you should wear something more lady-like," he snapped.

"So, now I'm not a lady?"

"You're in my bed, aren't you? Wearing next to nothing. Feeling me up and down, kissing the magic out of me. Not exactly lady-like behavior."

This time when her eyes went wide Ron knew for certain he'd gone too far. She stormed out of the room before he had a chance to think of an apology. It was late, he told himself by way of excuse for not stopping her. And he hadn't slept, so he wasn't thinking clearly. And, as he settled between his already-warm sheets he rationalized that it wasn't that he was glad she'd left, but he knew that he was. She complicated everything. Even sleeping. And he probably would've been glad for her absence had her scent not lingered on his pillows. No, he wasn't glad of anything. He wanted her, the way a wizard wants a witch.

Not five minutes later Harry stormed in. "What in the name of magic did you do this time?" he demanded from the foot of Ron's bed. His hair was messier than usual, and the right side of his face had a pillow imprint on it. "Hermione's in a state, I can tell you, and she said something about 'the prude,' which I took to be you."

"She's mental," Ron said, dismissingly. He was never a prude. She was a trollop.

"Yeah, well, she's kicked me out and sent Ginny back to Gryffindor, thanks a million!"

"Ginny's still sixteen, you know. She shouldn't be sleeping in her lover's bed, anyway."

Harry's color rose, as did the anger in his voice. "So, you deliberately sabotaged your relationship with your girlfriend so I couldn't spend the night with mine?"

"It was an accident!" Ron yelled, and bolted up in the bed. "And she's...she's..." Ron hung his head. She was too much for him. Ron couldn't imagine a lifetime of this. "She's mental. She's making me mental - I want her so much! Harry, just kill me now."

"I would if I didn't need you to keep me alive." He dove angrily on to his own bed. After a minute or two he asked, "You don't really have a problem with me and Ginny, do you?"

Did he? "Suppose not." It was weird, but there was something about it that seemed right.

"I'm going to marry her, you know."

Ron bolted up again. "She's sixteen!"

"Not now!" Harry said, and waved a calming hand at Ron. "Later. When she's graduated. After Voldemort."

"Oh," Ron said as he plopped back down on to his pillow. "That's all right, then." And then he thought about Harry and Ginny married, about them having a house together, having kids. He pictured Ginny as pregnant as Tonks had been, and then as dead. And Hermione dead. They might all be dead before the war played out. "It's real, isn't it? The Death Eaters and Tonks. And my dad. And you and Ginny. It's all real. We're not kids anymore, are we? You're going to

have to kill someone – granted, he is the most evil wizard of all time, but still. It's life or death. Life and death. We're back at Hogwarts, but we're teaching. And it's not a game. It's real. We're going to go into a real battle, and it won't be over until someone is dead." It wasn't exactly a realization – he'd known all of this before. But his brain finally put the pieces together and for the first time he was able to see the full scope of the picture. They'd grown up and into their destinies.

Harry didn't say anything – not that there was really anything to be said.

Ron got up then, grabbed his robe from his trunk, and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?" Harry asked.

"To make love to my girl," Ron told him. "I've just decided it's now or never."

It took her a while to answer his pounding fist on the door, but when she did he didn't wait for an invitation. Ron stepped in to her, slipped his arms around her waist, pulled her to him and kissed her. By the third kiss she was melting against him. By the fifth or sixth he had her top off. They stumbled on their way to the bed, shedding clothing and kissing and touching.

Together they fell on the mattress, though this time she landed on him, which was just fine with Ron. His palms found the soft globes of her rear and he relished the feel of them in his kneading hands, the feel of her belly pressing in to him. His heart hammered, his lungs burned and he took to gasping in between kisses for air. Her knees bent on either side of him to straddle his hips. Her breasts swayed as she moved her hands over his chest, as she dipped her head down to kiss his lips, his neck, his shoulder. She touched him like she loved him, and suddenly Ron understood what it meant to be adored. And what's more, he knew he was adoring her – he could see it in the delight in her beautiful, dark eyes.

He skimmed his fingers down her sides, over the smooth skin and the rough scars, and he spread his fingers over her hips, over her thighs.

It was hard to believe that this gorgeous, brilliant creature was his. He was so thankful to be hers. When she kissed her way back up to his mouth, his eyes prickled with tears. He didn't want them there, and didn't understand them. She must've sensed his distress, because she looked deep into his eyes. Her lips were wet and swollen, her expression full of desire. She didn't ask him about the single tear that rolled down his left cheek, but instead held out her hand. Her wand flew into her grasp.

"Meus uterus servo," she whispered, and single white pin-prick of light floated from the tip of her wand down to just below her navel. Her skin glowed as it absorbed the speck of magic, and then faded. She tossed the wand aside, and leaned closer to Ron again. Her nipples brushed the hairs on his chest.

"You're big. I want to be on top, this first time," she told him, as she reached between them. Her fingers curled around him, played with his tip.

"Anything you want," he managed with more of a breath than voice. He watched as she measured his weight in her hand, considering. "Stop thinking," he told her.

This made her smile. She rose up on her knees then, positioned his tip against herself. She leaned down to kiss him again, and as their tongues met, Hermione began to sink down over him. The sensation was more than Ron had expected – and nothing like he'd experienced on his own. She was wet and hot and so blissfully tight, and he pushed up deeper and deeper inside her. He felt the pressure rise fast and strong, and it overcame him before he could stop it. Ron cried out as he crested, and he thrust up each time his body surged. By the time he was spent he was so far within her that she sat on his pelvis, their bodies completely joined.

"Um...Ron?" she asked somewhat hesitantly.

He couldn't imagine what would have her so shy after what they'd just shared. "Hmm?" He was still soaring, floating, his body tingling and sated.

"Did you just...?"

"Hmm," he said. "Yup. Brilliant, it was."

"Oh." She didn't sound particularly pleased.

As he began to sink back down into his skin, a pleasant lethargy seeped into him. "You OK?" he asked.

"Fine," she said.

"That was brilliant," he told her. "Cheers."

She gasped, and he opened his eyes to a look of horror on her face. "Cheers?" she asked.

He yawned. "What is it?"

"Nothing," she said, but even in his post-coital state he could hear the disappointment in her voice. She lifted off of him, and winced as he slipped out of her like a wet fish. She collapsed on the bed beside him. "So, that's that, then."

"Hmm." He felt a blanket come up and cover him to mid-chest, and then her weight settle beside him. She sighed heavily, and Ron couldn't shake the feeling that all was not fine with her. He rolled on to his side and looked at her as she stared at the underside of the wood canopy. The blanket covered her chest, as well. He slowly pulled it down a little, and she didn't stop him.

"It wasn't so brilliant, I take it," he said, eyes full of the curve of her breast, her nipple, both bare for him now. "I thought it was brilliant."

"Yes, well...you finished, didn't you?"

This drew his attention up to her face. Her expression was blank, and she didn't look at him. "I did," he told her. But she hadn't. In Harry's lesson about girls topping off, he'd failed to mention how exactly one achieved that. Ron didn't even know where to begin. And he was

exhausted. And couldn't he just slip off to sleep? It would be so easy...

"I suppose I'll have to get you a book, too. Something with pictures, I dare say," she barbed.

"Honestly, with the books!" Ron whined. Although, if she had to get him a book, one with moving pictures... "Can't you just, I don't know, show me?" He ran a finger up the inside of her arm and smiled as she shivered. She didn't stop him, so he took that as an invitation to lean closer and kiss the side of her breast, then the top. Then the nipple. He loved the way she gasped when he sucked it into his mouth, and the tiny little whimper as he rolled its hard tip with his tongue. Her fingers laced through his hair, her nails scrapped his scalp. This, she liked. He did, too.

Her hand found him as he slipped his down beneath the covers and over the soft, flat of her belly. He thought she was going to stop him, but she guided him down lower instead. Slowly his fingers found a patch of soft hair – far softer than his – and she made a sweet sound as he explored. Her hand urged him on, though, and as he cupped her there between her legs, one of her fingers bent and forced his down into her wet heat. This was where he had just been. Was that blood?

He pulled his hand up and examined his fingers. Not blood, then. That was a relief. He looked back at her watching him. She was so very beautiful.

Ron slipped his hand back down her body, back to where she had led him, and sank another finger inside her. Her gasp woke his body again, went straight down from his belly to his groin. Her hand found his once more, and she guided him up just a little, until he found a small, swollen bead of flesh. She groaned.

"There," she said on a gasp. There, it was.

When he moved his finger in circles around that spot her head rolled to the side and her eyes glazed over. When he moved across it, she panted and mewled. When he added pressure her hips thrust up

against him. She pulled his head to hers and kissed him deeply. He wanted to be inside her again.

As he worked her, her hands ran over his body; his shoulders and arms, his waist and stomach, his bare hips. She found him stiff and sensitive, and he bucked as she ran a thumb over his tip. Then her hand was gone, whipped to his face, and she held his head as she kissed the bloody hell out of him. It was a kiss that left them both breathless.

"On your back," she commanded, and he immediately complied. She straddled him, pulled his hand from her thigh, and placed his thumb back on that special place between her legs. For a few moments she was still as stone as he played and teased. Her breasts quivered under her ragged breath, and that all too-familiar throbbing need returned. Her hips began to sway in a slow, rolling rhythm above him, against his hand, and she closed her eyes as she touched her own nipples. Ron groaned at the sight.

Something in her twitched, and she reached down for him, positioned him against her body's core once more. "Don't stop," she said with a ragged whisper, as she leaned forward and braced herself on his chest. "Faster," she urged. His thumb, while clumsier than his finger, was more than happy to comply.

She twitched again, and then slammed down on him, and Ron lost all ability to think or move or breath. He was vaguely aware that he'd grabbed her hips, that he was bucking up into her, that she cried out. But the look of awe, of revelation on her face was one he would never forget. Her eyes poured into his, as if she was reading his very soul, and he felt a new stirring deep within him. His magic was responding to her, too. He reached out to her with it, found her well, and without adding or subtracting he allowed his energy to swirl against hers. She gave a guttural cry, and went stiff and still.

Her body was tight and hot and convulsing, and unable to ignore his own need any longer Ron pushed up and up, and in to her - reaching and straining and pushing until he finally found his crest and he floated there, suspended, for the span of a heartbeat. She collapsed on top of him, but his hips still worked as he emptied inside her. And

then spent, his body went limp, his mind went dark, his magic slipped back to his well, and he floated away in a cloud of pure bliss.

He felt her stir, and that's what brought him back to himself. She pulled off of him, and settled beside him with a leg bent over his, and her head pillowed on his shoulder. His arm slipped naturally around her back, his hand settled in the curve of her waist. He kissed her head, nuzzled his cheek into her fluffy hair. His heart rate returned to normal. It became increasingly difficult to keep his eyes open; not that it mattered much. He felt the blanket settle over them again, felt her sigh. And as he drifted off to sleep he thought he heard her murmur "Love," or some such thing. Later he would look back at that perfect moment, though, and wonder if it hadn't been his own thoughts he heard.

End of chapter 17

Chapter 18 – The Chosen, the Forgiven, the Secret, and the Heart

"A five?" Ron couldn't believe his ears. "Last night was a seven if ever there was one!"

Hermione gave him a coy smile, a shrug, and ate another bite of her toast.

It was the last of breakfast. He and Hermione woke late that morning and had already missed Harry and Ginny, so they sat off by themselves at the end of Gryffindor table. At the next table over Ron recognized his two students, and they waved and giggled a little. He waved back.

"They've got a crush on you," Hermione said, though she didn't seem quite as put out as Ron would've expected.

"Naw," he said, and went back to his eggs. "They're just friendly. They're Hufflepuff's, after all."

"Of course they have a crush on you," she said with an exaggerated sigh. "As well they should. Just don't do anything to encourage them."

"Why would I do that?"

She didn't answer, but instead stared at her breakfast. "I don't believe it."

"What? Toast? I don't believe you'd choose it over eggs and bacon, either. I mean, toast is good with a cup of tea and some marmalade, but given the choice—"

"Shut up, Ron," she said, giggling. "No, I've just figured out the runes, I think. I don't know why I didn't see it before – it's just that everything seems so much clearer this morning."

This made Ron smile smugly. "That's because last night was of the seventh order, and you know it!"

"I know no such thing." She stood, then and muttered something about books and the library, and that was the last he saw of her that day.

Under Ron's careful instruction Charity Knowles managed a full Apparation during their morning lesson, and ended up within a meter of where she wanted to be. She seemed shocked when she reappeared, and it took her a couple of minutes to shake off the sensation of being squeezed through a rubber tube. Having witnessed her friend's success, though, Ruby Wu became jealous, and began to pout, but with a little encouragement from Ron she was beaming again by the end of the lesson. Ron felt the morning a success.

He went to the library to find Hermione, who hadn't been with Madame Pomfrey, and was surprised to find her absent. As he was already there, though, he decided to continue to delve into Rowena Ravenclaw's past. Miss Pince, the librarian, happened by a couple of times, and though Ron was very much within his rights to be looking through the books he couldn't help but feel they both knew he had no business to be there.

He'd just finished his sweep of the last book in his stack when a thick, dust-covered tome was dropped in front of him. Vulture-like, Miss Pince stood beside him, thin and hunched. Ron had trouble believing the old woman could lift the large, thick book without a spell's aid.

"Pages thirty seven through ninety-nine," she said, almost accusingly, and then lumbered away.

Ron looked down at the cover. Hengist of Woodcroft: The Life and Times of Hogsmeade's Father. Not what he'd been expecting, but Ron opened the cover anyway, and carefully turned the tissue-thin pages to page thirty seven.

Harry had had Dobby clear an area around the hearth in Hermione's apartment so the four of them could still meet secluded away from everyone else. They sat on cushions near the warming flames surrounded by books and parchments and little whirling, whizzing things piled so high that he felt as if they were in the valley of some elaborate canyon, hidden away from the rest of the world.

Hermione had drawn a list of words on a hand-held chalk board, next to three runes. She began her instruction. "Unlike our language, runes are complete words or parts of words that are dependant on each other for their meanings. On rune can mean a hundred different things if placed before or after any combination of other runes. Which is why I was having difficulty translating the meanings of these three. Until I realized this morning that they're less a sentence and more a code.

"The first rune is intelligence. The second is wisdom, and the third is cleverness. Taken at face value they are the quintessential Ravenclaw qualities we've all known since we first got here. But the order is important. In the drawing they're in that order: Intelligence, wisdom, cleverness. And that's what they mean."

Harry shrugged. "That would make sense – if those are her most valued attributes, and what she based her House on."

"Right," Hermione told him. "But in the woodcut she's holding the scepter backwards. Upside down." She opened the book Ron had found for them all to see. And sure enough, now that Ron knew what he was looking at, there was a tiny round ball just behind her hand that was partially hidden by her sleeve. "There's the scepter's head," Hermione said, and pointed to the ball.

"It's supposed to be a sapphire," Ron told them. He didn't remember where he'd read it, but he knew it was true.

"That's not a leap," Ginny said. "Their house color is blue."

"Backwards is the key, then?" Harry asked. "Why does that make a difference?"

"Because," Hermione told them, "If it's cleverness, wisdom, and intelligence – in that order – then wisdom after cleverness becomes the word 'secret.'"

"So, then, it's cleverness, secret, intelligence?" Ginny asked.

"Not quite. Because whenever the rune for intelligence follows secret, then it becomes 'power.' You see, it's a puzzle. And it's brilliant. There are eight layers! 'Power' turns 'secret' into 'danger,'" she said, drawing lines between the words as she went, "and 'danger' anywhere next to 'wisdom' turns 'wisdom' into 'prophecy.' 'Prophecy' directly in front of 'danger' becomes 'battle,' and 'battle' before 'power' becomes...well..." She seemed less sure of herself now. "It's hard to know, exactly. It's sometimes translated as 'ultimate' or 'final' or 'great.'"

"All of those mean basically the same thing, don't they?" Ron asked.

"Not to the runes, because they act on each other in different ways. If it's 'ultimate,' then we end up with the three words: 'doom, battle, ultimate.' If it's 'final,' then we end up with 'dead hero' or 'fallen hero,' then 'battle, final.' If it's 'great,' then it's just 'prophecy, battle, great,' because that combination is static."

All eyes went to Harry. He seemed startled by her findings. "I choose the last one, if I get to pick," he quipped.

"There is another possibility," Hermione continued, "though it makes little sense. 'Power' immediately after 'battle' can mean 'forgiveness.' Sometimes. Way back. Even before the ancients. Because forgiveness meant mercy. And if that word is 'forgiveness,' then it changes 'battle' to 'secret' again, and we end up with: 'prophecy, secret, forgiveness.'"

"'Prophecy, secret, forgiveness'?" Ginny echoed. "A secret prophecy of forgiveness?"

"I don't expect I'll be forgiving Voldemort anytime soon," Harry quipped darkly.

"Maybe it's a prophecy of a secret forgiveness," Ron said. "Hey! I bet if we had the scepter it would tell us – Hermione, you said wizards' scepters are magic, right?"

"But we don't know where it is," Hermione reminded him.

Ron grinned, and his chest swelled a little. "I think I might," he told them and laughed when all of their faces dropped. "I know! I can't believe it, either! But Irma Pince gave me this book – she wouldn't let me take it out of the library, but I copied down all the important stuff – and did you know that Hengist, the guy who founded Hogsmeade, was a relative of Rowena Ravenclaw? And did you know that his home is what we now call the Shrieking Shack?"

"No!" Harry exclaimed.

"Oh, yes, mate. And upon further investigations I discovered that while the shack didn't start shrieking until the 1970's – and we all know why that is now – the shack itself was considered quite haunted starting in 1946. That's when the Hogsmeade inhabitants boarded up all the windows and doors. And who do we know who's got enough blood on his hands to fill a house with restless spirits?"

"Wait, 1946," Hermione said thoughtfully. "Isn't that the year Tom Riddle killed Hephzibah Smith, Hufflepuff's only remaining descendant, and stole both the cup and the locket?"

"Give the woman a prize!" Ron said happily. "That's exactly when that happened."

"So, then, she was used to create a Horcrux?" Ginny asked. "What's the connection to the Shrieking Shack?"

"Not just any Horcrux," Harry said, inspiration in his eyes. "The scepter. I saw in the pensive that Riddle went to Smith's house to see if the rumors were true about the cup and locket, and then he came back later to kill her. There would be no reason to go and come back unless he had to retrieve something to use when he killed her. And she was a descendant from one of the original four. How much more perfect could it be? Kill her, make a Horcrux, dramatically alter one of the most powerful magical family lines, and get two more artifacts out of it at the same time! He must've thought he'd won the lotto!"

Hermione laughed. Ron and Ginny had no idea what a lotto was.

"You think Voldemort made the tunnel from the Whomping Willow to the shack?" Ron asked. "Or did the Mauraders do that?"

"If he did, then he probably was working on it while he was in school here at Hogwarts," Hermione surmised. "And if he researched Ravenclaw in the library here, then it's a fair assumption that he saw the woodcut with the scepter. If he was going after artifacts, then certainly that would be one he'd look for."

"There's only one way to find out!" Harry said, jumping up.

"Tonight?" Ginny asked.

"Wait!" Hermione cried out. "We have to come up with a plan!"

"No plans. And right now." He headed for the door. Ron made to go after him. Ginny and Hermione quickly followed.

"Not you," Harry told Ginny. "If we get caught you would be expelled."

"I'm not staying here!" she told him.

"Ginny," Harry said patiently. "We both know how important it is for you to graduate. To you and your mother, to me, to everyone. Besides, if we don't come back we'll need someone to alert Lupin. Please let's not argue about this when we both know you staying here makes more sense."

"Then let's not argue," she said, just as calmly. "I'm going, Harry Potter. I don't need your permission, and I certainly don't need your approval. If we're a team, then we're a team. Or were those just pretty words to get into my knickers?"

"Come on, you know that's not true." Harry, red in the face, looked to Ron for support.

"You've made that bed, mate. Looks like you'll be lying in it a long time to come."

Ron, Harry and Hermione hurried out of the castle, presumably with Ginny on their heels. She wore Harry's Invisibility Cloak, in an effort

to at least keep her hidden. The grounds were dark, and the night still had a chill. Ron's heart pumped far faster than their brisk walk required, and he wiped perspiration from his upper lip. He was nervous about their lack of strategy. Ron was the only one in the group who'd witnessed what Harry looked like after he destroyed the cup Horcrux. The others didn't know what it really cost Harry. A plan of attack made a lot of sense.

Halfway across the lawn and down the hill toward the Whomping Willow, Harry stopped abruptly and reached out beside him to stop Hermione as well. "There's someone there," he whispered loud enough for all of them to hear.

"Hagrid?" Ron asked. Hagrid's hut was on the other side of the Willow, and Ron could see the yellow glow of its windows.

Another few moments of straining against the darkness told them all that it couldn't possibly be Hagrid. The figure was too slight, too small, and wore a shawl.

"Madame Trelawney?" Hermione asked, shaking off Harry's hand and taking a few steps forward.

"Hello?" the figure called, and wandered in their direction. "Hello?"

It was Trelawney, and Ron thought she looked quite drunk. Her every third step gave way to a stumble, and she seemed to be gazing around as if she wasn't quite sure where she was.

"Professor Trelawney," Harry said. "Are you all right?"

"The stars!" she bellowed. "They're speaking to me!"

Harry looked back at Ron, who hadn't a clue as to how they should go about dealing with their old Divination professor. She was obviously in her cups.

"What are they saying?" Hermione irritably asked, her arms defiantly crossed.

"Very bad things!" Trelawney warned, and her voice warbled.

This elicited an eye roll from Hermione. "Right, then. Good night." She walked around Trelawney and towards the Willow.

Ginny took this opportunity to unveil herself. "What are you doing out there?" she asked the professor. Trelawney screamed, startled, and pressed a hand to her mouth.

"Ginny, no!" Harry cried, but it was much too late.

"Weasley," Trelawney said peering at Ginny, still with the Invisibility Cloak draped over her shoulders, through thick, round spectacles. "You've gone and lost your head."

"More like her body," Ron quipped.

Trelawney seemed to notice him for the first time. "Weasley," she said again. And then she looked at Harry. "Oh, you poor soul, you tempt the Fates on a night such as this. To be out...in the dark...alone."

"He's hardly alone," Hermione snapped.

Trelawney gazed at her for a moment or two. "Have we met?" she asked.

"Of course we've met," Hermione said tartly.

"I think we should bring her with us," Ginny said to Harry. He studied her, but didn't respond.

Hermione did. "You've got to be kidding!"

"I'm not," Ginny told her, somewhat cattily. "Remember who it was that made the first two prophecies concerning Harry...and now we're in search of a scepter that promises another prophecy-"

"Well, promise is a bit strong," Hermione muttered.

"- and it can't be coincidence that she's out here – here – by the Willow tonight. It's not like it's her custom to come down from her tower!"

"Professor Trelawney," Harry asked. "Do you know why you're out here tonight?"

"It's a night full of omens, my dear boy. Dark, terrible omens! The stars are speaking!"

"She's gone mental," Ron said under his breath to Harry. "Never was one with all her wits about her..."

"She's coming," Harry told them.

"No way!" Hermione said, shocked. "Because she's your girlfriend?"

"Because she's got a point," Harry told her sharply. "You're still sore because Trelawney told you you haven't any talent as a seer."

"Not an ounce, of Gift, I'm afraid," Trelawney said sadly. "And such a plain little girl..."

Hermione crossed her arms and fumed.

"She's coming," Harry repeated, and then he and Ginny began to steer the teacher in the direction of the Willow.

"She's off her gourd," Ron told Hermione, as he wrapped an arm around her shoulders to get her walking again. She went with him only hesitantly. "You're far from plain. She obviously needs stronger glasses."

"He chose Ginny over me," Hermione grumbled.

"Of course he did. He's sleeping with her, isn't he? I'd choose you in a heartbeat."

She rolled her eyes. "He used to care what I thought."

"I'm sure he still does," Ron assured, not at all certain why Hermione was so against Ginny all of a sudden, and then he remembered it wasn't all of a sudden. "So, what happened between you two, anyway? You and Ginny, I mean."

"Nothing," she said quickly. It was exactly what he'd expected her to say.

"As your True Love I must say that I'm hurt and offended that you would keep these kinds of secrets from me." He used a mock offended tone that had won him begrudging grins in the past.

She rolled her eyes and sighed, and Ron knew he had her. "Oh, all right." She turned to him, but stared at his chest. "But you must promise to keep this to yourself." She sighed and looked over toward the Willow, toward Harry. "Ginny and I were...comparing...and I gave her some pointers...and, well, I think I may have said too much."

"About what?" Ron asked.

She looked at his knees. "About Harry."

"Huh," Ron said. He wasn't sure how he felt about that.

"We're pairing off," she said, almost as if she was thinking aloud. "I never see Harry anymore. Or Ginny, but that's more because she's taken to avoiding me." She glared at them, and Trelawney between them. "It's all changed between us."

"We've grown up. He's got another girl in his life now." And then a sick thought popped into his head. It made his stomach go all wonky. "You're never jealous of Ginny, are you?" It made sense, really, now that she'd slept with both of them she might've decided that she liked being with Harry better. He took a step back and forced the cool night air into his lungs.

"I suppose I am, a little. I've had you both to myself for so very long now... Oh, Ron, that's not what I mean and you know it. I'm over Harry. Romantically, that is. But he's still my best friend, and, well,

now we're four instead of three, I suppose. Or, tonight I should say five." This last comment had a barb.

"Come on," Ron said, though he refrained from the arm around her this time. His insides were a little knotted.

They came up behind the other three, and without breaking her stride Hermione lifted her wand and shouted, "Immobulious!" The Whomping Willow immediately stopped whomping. Apparently, Harry and Ginny hadn't thought of that.

Ron said with a smirk of pride, "That's my girl!"

They all slipped down the gaping hole at the base of the tree, and into the dark tunnel below. Hermione and Harry lit their wands.

"Oh, my," Trelawney said repeatedly. "Oh, my stars..."

The passage was incredibly narrow, and brought back the terrifying memory of Ron being dragged along its length, backwards and by his broke leg. That was the first time they'd met Sirius and learned the truth about Scabbers. They'd been just children, then.

When at last they made it to the rickety staircase that led up and in to the bottom floor of the Shrieking Shack, a blast of air slammed the door open at the top of the stairs. It whooshed past them down the tunnel.

Trelawney gasped. "The spirits are abound! We dare not go in!"

"We've got to go," Harry told her. "It'll be all right."

"Uh...Harry," Ron said over his hammering heart. "Maybe she's right."

"Don't be ridiculous, Ron," Ginny snapped. "If you're afraid you can wait out here."

"Who's afraid? I'm just saying that the professor has a point."

"Then stay here," Ginny told him, as she headed up the stairs. Harry followed close behind with the professor in tow. Hermione sighed and followed, leaving Ron to stare up after them. There were spiders up there. He could feel it in his bones.

They gathered in what was left of the parlor, with the crumbling grand piano and shattered chandelier. Dust and cobwebs covered every surface including the ceiling. The curtains were in tatters and the windows were boarded up. The walls moved, and creaked as they did so, and the floor thumped along as if it was walking on them. Nothing was straight or still in the old place, and it had a dizzying effect.

"The village of Hogsmeade came together in 1946 and boarded this place up. Seems a young couple came in for a bit of privacy and the walls drove them mad – or so the legend goes. The villagers even capped off the chimney to keep the evil in."

"Nonsense," Hermione said. "Lupin spent a night here once a month while he was at Hogwarts, and it never drove him mad."

"I'm just telling you what was in the books," Ron said. "But now that I think about it, if it wasn't this place that drove them mad, then maybe it was something else they encountered while they were here. In 1946."

"Or someone else," Harry said grimly. "Dumbledore told me about how Tom Riddle lured two children from his orphanage into a cave – the same cave where he hid the Slytherin locket – and those children were never the same again. Maybe the young couple happened on him, and he did something to them, too."

"And then Hogsmeade goes and boards this place up? Maybe he had a hand in that, too. One or two well-placed Imperius Curses and let the hysteria build on itself," Ginny said as she walked slowly around the room. It was her first time in the Shack, of course, and she was obviously disturbed by it. Ron had been there before and he was still found it...unsettling.

"Where do we begin looking?" Hermione asked. "Harry, you know Voldemort the best. Where would he hide his Horcrux?"

"In a place of honor," Harry said, without even having to think about it. "Trophy curio, or awards wall. Or..." Something must've occurred to him because he left the room then with purpose.

"Harry?" Ginny asked, and then they all followed.

"Where would the portrait gallery be? This is an old house, right? An old pure blood wizard's house. They always have a pedigree gallery some...ah."

The main entry of the Shack was once a three story affair with stairs and landings lining the circular space up to the cupola at the top. Now, of course the stairs looked as if they'd rotted under thread-bare, dusty rugs, and the railings were broken or missing or barely there. Hanging on the walls were once ornate frames in every size imaginable, many of the canvases were now slashed or hanging in rags. Of the canvases that remained intact, most of the subjects had gone long ago, their paint heavily cracked and faded. It was dark in the entry, though, and difficult to make out anything significant from the ground floor, even with all four of their wands focusing light up at the walls.

"What is this foul place?" Trewlany asked, having finally discovered where she stood. "It is full of evil and death, can you not smell it?"

In truth, the place did smell like decay, Ron decided. He wondered if that's what evil was supposed to smell like.

"Right, then," Harry said and made to go up the stairs.

"Wait!" cried Hermione, and stopped him in his tracks. "This isn't safe," she told him. "You've no idea if those stairs can even hold you." She lifted her wand to him and cast, "Wingardium leviosa!" Harry rose into the air.

"Brilliant!" he called out. She didn't even try to hide her proud smile. "Now, get me closer to that one there," he commanded, and she aimed him in that direction.

"Er...Harry..." This was Ginny, and her hesitant voice made them all look to her. She pointed directly up. Harry, Ron and Ginny all pointed their wands at the very center of the square ceiling three stories above them, and a deep blue glint shined back. In a house covered in dust it was quite startling to see something that shiny. Something that could only be a sapphire.

"Get me closer," Harry called down.

"No!" Hermione yelled up. "It could be cursed!"

"I'm almost certain that it is," Harry told her. "Get me close enough to see it properly. Trust me!"

She huffed, but relented, and steered Harry higher and closer to the ceiling above. As he went he lit the walls and portraits and Ron did detect some movement in them, however little. The walls were still shifting, and the floor rapt sharply under them. Hermione stumbled a step to the right and Ginny caught her so that Hermione could catch Harry, who had fallen several meters when Hermione's wand jerked.

"Good catch!" Harry called.

"Thanks," both Ginny and Hermione answered, and then glared at each other.

"Focus," Ron reminded them, and the girls scowled and then looked back up to Harry. They really had a lot in common, Ron decided. Both were stubborn, brave and strong, and both loved to be right.

"What do you see?" Ginny called up.

"It looks like the scepter," Harry yelled down. "I can even make out the runes. And there's a...an eagle, I think. It looks like a crest."

Ron wasn't watching Harry, though. His gaze was locked on Hermione, and her wand arm. It was shaking as if her muscles were quivering under a heavy load. "Herm-"

"Harry!" she cried, "I can't hold..." She didn't even finish the sentence. Her arm dropped to her side, and then she collapsed to the floor, kicking up dust in a great cloud around her.

Both Ginny and Ron pointed their wands and called, "Arresto momentum!" together, and Harry stopped just a meter above them, suspended.

"Give me a broom over this any day!" Harry gripped. "Hermione, are you all right?"

Seeing Ginny had Harry's well-being in hand Ron dropped down beside his girlfriend. He rolled her shoulder back and turned her head gently toward him, and she gave him a faint smile. "Can't move," she told him. "Weak."

"I'm getting you out of here," Ron said, and slipped an arm below her head.

"Ron, I need you here," Harry said, coming up behind him now, having landed safely.

"Something's wrong with Hermione," Ron told him. He slipped his other arm behind her knees and lifted her with a grunt.

"The Horcrux is right there!" Harry insisted.

"Look, mate, I'd do anything for you, but if you're asking me to choose between my Love and you, you lose." He shifted Hermione closer to him; she was dead weight, and deceptively heavy.

"It's an Energy Drain Spell," Harry told him. "It's one of Voldemort's protective curses on this place. Any bit of magic used will drain ten-fold from our wells."

Ron's eyes narrowed. "I've never heard of anything like that."

"Just...try and give her a little of your magic," Harry said.

"No!" Ron was horrified that Harry would suggest it. "Don't you remember what happened to her that first time the two of you attempted the energy exchange?"

"Why? What happened?" Ginny asked.

Harry glared at Ron. "I was taking. You'll be giving. It's completely different. Just be careful not to give too much and she'll be fine."

"Wait," Ginny insisted. "What happened?"

"I'm taking her to Madame Pomphrey."

"Stop." Harry put a firm hand on Ron's arm. "This is how it is, mate. This will be how it is when we go into battle. We have to make choices, and they're not going to be easy. Hermione's not hurt, she's not in any pain. We can't just stop everything any time one of us takes a blow. We have to get the Horcrux, and we have to destroy it."

Harry made a very convincing argument, and Ron was torn. He looked up at the sapphire, now just a shape in the murky darkness and his heart thumped in his chest. He gazed down at the witch in his arms, and his heart twisted.

"Where's Professor Trelawney?" Ginny asked. None of them had noticed when she'd wandered out of the room.

"Blast it!" Harry cursed, and then he and Ginny rushed out to find their wayward teacher.

Ron lowered Hermione to the ground. "I'm going to give you a little magic," he told her. "Not much, but enough that you can stand on your own." Her eyes blinked slowly. "It's going to be important that you not cast any spells. With your reserves so low it could...I don't know, but I don't want to risk you burning out completely. Understand?" She blinked again.

Ron pulled up a little of the cold within him, and reached out to her with it. He had trouble finding her with his magic, and he began to fear that there was something terribly wrong. But then, like a pearl in

an oyster, she was there. He smoothed over her, cradled her, let his magic fill her well; always mindful not to over do. And the girl in front of him sighed deeply.

"You...did this...last night," she said, her voice breathy and weak. "This, I remember feeling."

"Easy now," Ron said as he helped her to sit. "You're going to feel a but shaky at first-" He was cut off when her lips pressed hard into his. She grabbed the front of his shirt and pulled him closer.

"I guess you're feeling better, then," he quipped. She nodded, but her eyes were full of his lips. "Are you feeling better?"

She nodded again. "I feel very...queer. I can't quite..." She grabbed his ears and pulled him down for another fierce lip-lock.

"Knock it off," Harry said, irritation dripping from his voice. He and Ginny pulled Trelawney between them. She seemed reluctant to return to the entry, and terrified of what hung from the ceiling.

Ron helped Hermione to her feet. She swayed a little, but remained standing.

"You're in charge of this one," Harry told Hermione, and placed Trelawney's arm in her hand.

"She was trying to claw her way out through a wall," Ginny added, dryly. "I think, perhaps, Hermione was right-"

A shaft of blue light shot down through the center of the room, and caught Professor Trelawney in its beam. She froze, as if stuck, and then began to rise ever-so-slowly. A blast shot Hermione and Ginny off of the professor, and threw them both back against the walls.

Sybil Trelawney's head fell back, her eyes rolled to white, her voice was low and throaty and eerie.

"The Dark War will end with an evil death
Only if the Chosen can keep his forgiven secret,

Only if the Chosen can protect his heart.
The time will be selected by the fifth little death -
A fortnight more before the darkness will descend.
The Dark shall call at midnight at the home of them both,
The place of beginnings and ends.
And if one shall survive the other must die;
For some hearts will surely be broken,
And some deeds cannot be forgiven,
And some secrets are meant to be told."

There was another blast and Professor Trelawney fell to the floor as nothing more than dust, a shawl, and a pair of spectacles.

Ginny gasped, threw her hands over her face and looked away, Hermione went still and stared. Harry stood slowly and walked to the edge of the beam. Ron didn't know what to do.

"Everyone out," Harry said. "It's time to finish this."

"I'm not leaving you!" Ginny wailed.

"I said out!" An odd wind picked up in the room, and Ron felt the tell-tale signs of Harry in his well.

"I'm feeding Hermione, mate," Ron warned.

"Ginny, get Hermione out of here," Harry commanded. His eyes focused on the Horcrux above. "Ron will have to cast a Shield Spell and he can't feed Hermione and me and Shield all four of us at the same time."

"But-" she tried to argue, as confusion and fear settle in.

"I need you, Ginny. I need you to get Hermione to safety."

Her face was pale, distraught, and Ginny shook her head. But she went to Hermione and caught her as Ron pulled away. Ginny levitated her friend, and with one backward look at Harry, she turned and hurried the two of them to the underground tunnel.

"Can you do it?" Harry asked, his gaze focused upward.

"Can I feed you and cast a Shield Spell at the same time?" Ron clarified. "You mean my Patronus? You're far better at that than I am, you know."

"Unfortunately, I have to destroy the Horcrux. Anyone else who has tried has met with unfortunate ends." Harry looked at him now. "Ron, mate, it has to be the strongest Shield you've ever produced." Harry shook his head, looked back up at the Horcrux. "I wish there was another way."

Harry looked worried, and this worried Ron. "Maybe there is. Maybe if we get Lupin-

"Lupin can't do this," Harry said sternly. "It has to be me. And I need you. Anyone else...well..." He looked down at the ash pile and shawl. "She had to be here for the scepter to give us the prophecy. Her death is on me. I don't want anyone else's to be." He turned back to Ron. "The most powerful Patronus you can muster. Put everything you've got into it."

Ron nodded. "Everything."

"You've really been the best mate, you know?" Harry said quietly.

"You, too, Harry. You, too."

With a deep breath Harry pulled out his wand. "Ready then?"

Ron gripped his firmly in his hand. "Ready."

They stepped together, each with their own purpose, and each thinking of a girl. Ron felt Harry's pull tighten, and the cold inside started to rise. Ron reached out with his magic and linked with Harry's, gave energy to him. He focused on the night before with Hermione. His Patronus appeared: a small, squash-faced cat that sat patiently and flicked the tip of his tail. It did look like Crookshanks, with tufts of fur sticking every which way, but Ron didn't let that bother him. He focused on that cat and Hermione, and let his magic flow.

Harry began to siphon more from him, and Ron pulled up more and more energy to compensate. At first this stretching of his magic felt good, invigorating, but as the minutes wore on it began to hurt. There was a burning sensation, and Ron grabbed his middle with his off hand to quiet it.

"Don't pull back!" Harry screamed, though Ron could barely hear him. A huge, howling wind had come out of no where, whirling and churning as it slammed through the house. The walls and floors shook even harder, groaned and cracked under the pressure. And what portraits were left came to life to protest, though they were mostly drowned out by the whistle-like siren emanating from the Horcrux as it was being split apart. Was that Voldemort's soul screaming as it died? There was a tremendous cold that descended on the room. Ron thought he could actually smell the magic in the air; fresh and vaguely metallic.

But he ignored all that, as McGonagall had instructed, and he remembered Hermione's cat-like smile as she lay contented against his chest. He thought of the feel of her fluffy hair between his fingers - it was starting to grow out once more - and the pink, uneven patch on her neck and cheek where she'd burned herself with Viktor's wand. And then he imagined running a finger over the special place at the base of her spine, between the dimples where her back met her bum. That wonderful, concave place both smooth and rough now, both perfect and scarred. He loved that hidden place. He loved the way she giggled when he kissed it. The way she watched him over her shoulder with dark eyes that sparked in the firelight.

When at last the pain in his gut became too much to ignore, Ron opened his eyes again. There was a brilliant flash of red. The walls blew away. And all that was left was a blue light that canopied them like an umbrella. Ron felt Harry's magic fall away. He pushed out farther, followed his friend and filled him with as much as he could, and threw even more energy at his Crookshanks while he thought of his mistress.

But the pain became too much, and thought of Hermione gave. He opened his mouth to scream, but nothing came out.

Then, everything went black.

Ron saw stars. Millions of them. Tiny specks of white against black. Sirius...there he was. Canis Majoris. The Dog Star. The brightest light in the sky. And there was Regulus, Sirius' brother. Greek name Alpha Leonis. The Lion Star.

Astronomy had never been one of Ron's strongest subjects – most of the time he copied off Hermione – but as he lay there looking up at the stars he couldn't help marveling at the vastness of it all. There was Bellatrix – that evil witch – in Orion. And...Andromeda. Tonks' mother. Shiny in the sky. Were all the Black family named after stars? Funny thing to do, name a person after a star...or was it the other way 'round?

So many stars...

Oh, Tonks. You left too soon. Your son won't remember you. He still needs you. And Remus. We all need you.

"Get help!"

Are you with my dad? With Sirius? Up there in the sky looking down on us all? Just a point in the night? Tell him I love him. Tell him he was a good father. Tell him he was right...about everything.

"They're over there! In the crater!"

Or, maybe I'll tell him myself. Am I dying? Or already dead? I hope not. Hermione would never forgive me. And Harry... Is he safe? Where is he? Where am I? Madam Rosmerta?

"Here! They're here! Call up to Hogwarts! They need the infirmary!"

Are you a star, too, Madam Rosmerta? You're a goddess, you know? Hermione told me once, and I believed her. A goddess in some religion long forgotten, and not a star...just surrounded by stars. Don't leave...

"Are they alive? I can't imagine how anyone could survive-"

"It's Harry Potter. He's the boy who lived, isn't he?"

"Must be true, then, what they say 'bout him being the Chosen One."

There were people there now, though Ron didn't know how many or who. Their shadows passed over him, and occasionally a face or a shoulder would block out the stars. Someone was touching him, his hand and face. Someone was crying – there was always someone crying, wasn't there?

And then he was floating. A cloud drifted, blocked out the stars. And when it passed Draco smiled down at him. Yes, Draco was a Black – his mother was a Black, so he was, too – but he didn't have a star. Draco had an entire constellation. The Dragon. Leering down at Ron, baring its teeth, whispering to him and laughing. Whispering a secret: that he was the secret.

The stars were talking, just as Professor Trelawney had said.

And then they were just stars again, dusting the nothing that stretched out above.

The next time Ron was aware of anything he was looking at the wood arches that held up the vaulted ceiling in the Hogwarts infirmary. It was a familiar sight, as was Hermione who sat by his bed reading a book. She had a bit of her light brown hair tucked behind her ear, and a stern look of concentration knitting her brows. After a moment she looked over to him and started when she realized he was looking back. She smiled.

"You all right?" Ron asked. She looked completely recovered from her sudden weakness at the Shrieking Shack. She confirmed this with a nod.

"A couple of days of rest and I'm good as new."

It took a moment for this to sink in. "A couple of days?" Ron's throat was dry and rusty, and his voice sounded more like a frog's croak than anything else.

"It was a week ago last night that you and Harry destroyed the Horcrux. And the Shrieking Shack. And most of the hill it sat on. What happened, Ron?"

He shook his head. It was too thick and muddled to think too hard. "Harry...OK?" he asked. He rolled his head to one side and found Harry two beds over. He looked as pale as the first time Ron had seen him just after a Horcrux was destroyed, with dark and hollowed eyes, grey lips. He didn't look at all right.

"You've been in and out," Hermione said quietly. "Harry hasn't moved a muscle in a week." Her eyes dropped to Ron's hand, and she brushed the tip of her fingers against his. The barest touch sent a tingle of sensation all the way up to his arm pit. "We're all terribly worried about him. Nothing Madam Pomfrey does seems to make any difference at all. Ginny is beside herself."

Now Ron looked at Harry with concern. Had he burned him out? Ron remembered the drain of his energy, the way it flowed from him like a geyser, and the pain. There were so many demands on his magic – his own Patronus, Harry's draw, and the curse that had demanded payment. With so much leaving him Ron couldn't remember if he had even tried to control what Harry had gotten. He very well could have burned his mate out and not even realized it. And if he had...

Ron struggled to sit up, despite Hermione's protests, though eventually she just gave up and helped him on to one elbow. Ron closed his eyes and reached out to Harry with his magic, shocked to find his own energy weak and sluggish. He searched beyond where he expected to find Harry, pushed farther in. Where there should've been cold there was nothing at all. Ron whimpered his distress, and he felt Hermione's grip on his arm tighten.

If he'd burned Harry out he'd be defenseless. The war with You-Know-Who was lost, but so was his friend, because there was no doubt in any of their minds that Voldemort would not let Harry live under any circumstances. If Ron had burned Harry out, he'd want to be dead.

Please, he pleaded with any force that might help. Please let him be all right.

When at last he'd gone as far as he dared, Ron collapsed back on his bed. "I've killed him," he whispered. Heat prickled his eyes.

Hermione protested with a weak, "No," but she didn't understand. She wasn't there. She had no clue as to what passed between him and Harry when they shared magic. Ron shook his head again, and a tear slipped down the side of his face.

Ron closed his eyes. He couldn't leave, could run away, and so he closed his eyes and reached out again. He dove into Harry's empty well. "He's gone," Ron whispered. "All his magic..." Ron balled in that empty place, pooled and filled, never finding walls to confine him or other magic to reject him. And with what energy he could muster Ron laid there and filled his friend, gave him all of his magic, his energy, his life. Harry had to survive, after all, Ron did not. It was a truth Ron had known even first year. Ron could be sacrificed, but Harry must go on.

Ron felt Hermione's hand slip into his, and he held it with all his might. He would miss her, he was sure. And she would undoubtedly miss him, but it was Harry that had to face Voldemort in the end, not them. And Hermione would live, even with a gaping hole in her soul, and she would find a way to forgive him for leaving.

And then there was a ripple in the immense pool Ron gave him, and a small, snake-like sensation that Ron found familiar. Harry was there, swimming through the magic. Then Harry, two beds down, began to scream a deep, throaty rebellion, and Ron felt him push against the energy he'd given. There were shouts, voices, as people began to panic, but Ron knew what to do. He pulled back and took his magic with him; slowly, of course, because of the sluggishness within him. But Ron retreated, and as he did he felt Harry grow stronger, reach out to him, poke him a little. Ron poked back.

Harry stopped screaming, and now someone was crying. Ron couldn't move, couldn't open his eyes. He concentrated on his withdrawal. His assault had worked. Harry would be all right.

When he woke again, it was dark, and the room was still and quiet. Ron lolled his head and found Harry where he'd left him. Hermione was asleep on the bed between them. Ginny's head turned to him and caught his eye, and her face lit up when she saw him awake. She rose silently and hurried to his side.

"Ron! Thank the stars!" she whispered, and leaned down to hug him as best as she could. His arms were still too heavy to lift. "We've all been so worried! Mum's come to stay at the castle, and Bill and Fleur have been here twice. Lupin's just beside himself – honestly, we were sure he was going to lose it for a while there."

"Harry?" he managed to croak out.

She glanced back over her shoulder, her eyes filled with tears. "He's looking better, but...you're the first to wake up." When she looked back at her brother she tried to give him a smile. "You'll be all right, now, don't worry."

"I'm not worried," Ron told her. "Harry, too."

She nodded, but he could see she didn't believe him. He could see the pain in her pretty face. It reminded him of their mum.

Two days later Ron was sitting up in bed, eating dry toast and tea, wanting eggs and bacon and potatoes, when Harry groaned. It was the first sound he'd made in two weeks, and everyone in the room froze. But then he groaned again, and Ron thought he heard a weak "Ginny," come out of his lips, and everyone jumped up and yelled in celebration. Hermione and Ginny hugged each other laughing, Lupin ran to Harry's side. Ron's mum, who was holding a green little Jack, started to cry all over again. Madam Pomfrey went into healer mode and forced Neville, Luna, Seamus, and Hagrid out of the infirmary so she could tend to her patient. Everyone else was soon to follow, though Ginny kissed her boyfriend on the cheek before she went.

Harry opened his eyes that night, and the next day he was able to sit propped up in the bed. Madam Pomfrey kept a stern eye on the four of them, refusing to allow them to discuss anything weightier than the

weather or the latest Quidditch scores. Hufflepuff was doing quite well that year, and it looked as if Gryffindor might lose to them.

Ron was released a week later feeling rested and bored out of his skull. His students, he discovered, no longer needed him as they both managed to pass their Apparition exams, and were proud (and a little giggly) when they showed him their licenses. Lupin had taken over tutoring Harry's students, and Ron was told that attendance had plummeted.

His first night out of the infirmary Hermione led Ron back to his quarters in Ravenclaw Tower. She crawled into bed with him, kissed him sweetly on the lips, doused the lights, and rolled on her back.

"Ron, I can't stand it," she said in a desperate tone. "I need to know what happened at the shack."

"This bed is bigger," he said, staring up at the canopy. "Did you get a new bed?"

"I transfigured it into a double. I'm serious, Ron. You and Harry have been avoiding the issue, and I need to understand what happened with the Horcrux, and you and Harry. McGonagall was the one who told us that something terrible had happened in Hogsmeade that night, though I was so out of it, her words didn't really register with me until the next morning. Ginny was the one who had to tell McGonagall about Professor Trelawney. She was there with me in the infirmary, when you and Harry were brought in."

"I don't remember that."

"I'm glad," Hermione said quietly. "Lupin went all scary. We were afraid he might transform again."

"He didn't?"

"No."

That was good. If he'd turned feral in the infirmary there would be no telling what would've happened to him. Or to Hogwarts. It could've been a very messy situation.

"Your mum came," Hermione told him, and rolled closer. She draped an arm over his chest and played with his t-shirt. He hugged her shoulder closer and inhaled the smell on her hair. It was girly and nutty, and maybe even a little sweet. "She tended to Jack that first night. Lupin and Ginny and I...well...it was a difficult night."

She inhaled sharply, dislodging the memory. "Tell me, Ron. Please."

And so, Ron told her what he could remember about the Horcrux and destroying it, though his memory was spotty at best. He'd been told there was an explosion and that the Shrieking Shack had been completely and utterly destroyed. Kingsley and Moody had both made detailed sweeps of the area and there was no sign at all of the Horcrux or even the rest of the old house. Ron had no memory of an explosion, though there was something vague in his head about things blowing away.

He smoothed her hair back from her face and whispered about the stars, then, and Draco – the constellation. She listened to his story with her arm hugging his chest, and her breath warming his soul. In that moment he felt he could tell her anything at all.

The following night Ron and Hermione sat beside Harry's bed, while Ginny sat with his feet in her lap, massaging them, and they talked about the new prophecy for the first time. Ginny produced a small piece of parchment, already well-worn and creased, and she read aloud what they all had heard that night.

"I ate two of Fred and George's Memory Snaps, so I'm reasonably sure I got it all down properly," Ginny told them.

"Aren't those banned from Hogwarts?" Hermione asked pointedly.

"Yes. They are."

Were they still fighting? Ron wondered. It had been ages. But Hermione seemed to think better of whatever it was she was about to say, and instead she muttered, "Well, good thinking. It's important to get it right."

This response seemed to surprise Ginny, who then offered her a hesitant smile. "That's what I thought," she said.

"So," Hermione said, "why don't we take it line by line and see what we come up with?"

Ginny read the first line. "'The Dark War will end with an evil death.'"

"Evil death – that can only be Voldemort," Ron said happily. "Good news, at last!"

"Well, it could mean a death by evil means," Hermione offered. "But I do think the Dark War refers to this war now."

"Agreed," Harry said. "Next line."

"'Only if the Chosen can keep his forgiven secret,'" Ginny read. "If you're the Chosen, Harry, then what's your secret?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't have any secrets," he said. "The Prophet has made sure of that."

"I'm your secret," Ron told them. "I'm your Smisurato."

"It says forgiven secret," Hermione corrected. "Has Harry forgiven you?"

Ron looked at his friend. "Yeah," he said. "It was touch and go there for a while." Once Hermione fled to Bulgaria Harry had sworn he'd never forgive Ron. For a while Ron had believed him.

Both Ginny and Hermione exchanged questioning looks, but neither Harry nor Ron elaborated.

"Next line," Harry said.

"Only if the Chosen can protect his heart."

Harry's hand went reflexively to his chest. "That I'll try to do."

"Hart could be a buck," Hermione reminded them. "Or it could be a symbolic heart."

"So," Ron said, "The war will end either in Voldemort's death, or the death of someone else by evil – we're assuming Harry on that, yes? But only if Harry can keep me, and protect his heart at the same time?"

Hermione looked doubtful, but didn't offer a rebuttal. Harry just looked dark. "Next line."

"The time will be selected by the fifth little death," Ginny said.

Hermione cleared her throat. "A 'little death' could be what the French call le petite mort...an orgasm."

Harry snorted. "Whose would the prophecy be foretelling?"

"Well...yours, presumably," Hermione said, and her cheeks went very red.

"Yes, well, we passed up that benchmark last fall, if I remember correctly," Harry said with a subdued grin.

Ginny stared at the paper. "A fortnight more before the darkness will descend."

"So a fortnight after I have my fifth top-off, all hell will break lose?" Harry quipped.

"Maybe it means you with Ginny," Hermione posed.

Ginny went red even redder, but continued to stare at the paper. "The Dark shall call at midnight at the home of them both."

"The home of both Ginny and Harry?" Ron asked.

"Them both probably refers to Harry and Voldemort," Hermione said.

"You know, I'd rather the prophecy didn't refer to my love life," Harry said, cutting in.

"Yes, well, I'd rather the prophecy didn't refer to you at all," Hermione said tartly. "I'd rather none of us had to deal with this, but we don't always get what we want, do we?"

They all froze in surprise. Then Ginny read another line. "'The place of beginnings and ends.' So if the home of them both is a place of beginnings and ends. Where would that be? Harry doesn't technically call Privet Drive home anymore-

"Godric's Hollow," Harry said. "It's where all of this started, and I guess it's where it will end. One way or the other."

"The home of them both," Hermione quote. "Unless Voldemort has taken up residence there...he hasn't, has he?"

Harry looked a little green. "I don't know."

Ginny continued. "'And if one shall survive the other must die.'"

"We've heard that one before," Ron muttered.

"For some hearts will surely be broken."

Moody had said more people would die before it was all over. That was the nature of war.

"And some deeds cannot be forgiven."

Harry looked at Ron, then Hermione, and then Ginny.

"And some secrets are meant to be told."

End of chapter 18

Chapter 19 – At the Place of Beginnings and Ends

As Remus Lupin had taken over Harry's tutoring, and Ron's students no longer needed him, Ron had Jack for most mornings. This suited him just fine. He played with the baby, fed him, changed him, and watched his fuzzy hair go from a pale pink to blue as he slept. All under the pretense, of course, of reading Dumbledore's journals. Ron had finished three in the first week after Madam Pomfrey pronounced him sound, all of which had taken place before Tom Riddle was ever born.

The current journal was no exception. Ron was about to put it aside when Dumbledore wrote about a young witch named Emma. Apparently the two of them had been friends for years before Dumbledore felt "the unmistakable pangs of love," and by that time the witch was already betrothed. He went on for pages and pages listing numerous attempts to woo his sweetheart, and in the end she married the other wizard. It was quite sad, actually. When he went to visit Harry, Ron was in a right funk.

"Did you ever wonder," Ron asked Harry as he settled Jack on his back on the chair next to him, "why Dumbledore never married?"

"Not really, no," Harry told him. He was still looking a little pale, and was propped up by several pillows.

"Have you ever heard of Emma Thistleblow?"

Harry shook his head. "Who is she?"

"No idea," Ron told him. "But Dumbledore quite fancied her."

"Really?" Ron understood Harry's surprise. It was difficult to imagine Dumbledore interested in girls. Not that he would be interested in boys, but Dumbledore had been so old when they knew him – ancient, really - and, well, love was for the young. Had Dumbledore ever been young?

"You look like death," Ron told his friend. Dark, sunken eyes, pale and pasty complexion, dull hair. Harry looked much like he did back at number 12 after he managed to destroy the cup.

"I feel fine," Harry protested. He'd said as much the last time, too. "I think one more night of coddling, and I'm out of here."

"You'd leave without Madam Pomfrey's say-so?" Ron asked, doubtful.

"I think I can take her in a duel, if it comes to that," Harry said lightly with a slight smile. "But honestly, it's been four weeks since we destroyed the Horcrux. It's past time to get on with the next."

Ron wondered at Harry's time table. "Are you getting anything...?" He pointed at his forehead.

Harry touched his own in reflex, and rubbed his scar. "No," he said. "He's been unusually quiet. I'd expected he'd be furious after the scepter and all, but I've not felt a peep out of him since I came to."

"Maybe he's busy trying to find the remaining Horcruxes, and that's why you're not feeling him at the moment," Ron suggested. "What's left again?"

"The locket, for one." Harry looked thoughtful. "The snake, maybe. Or something else that belonged to Gryffindor. Ginny's been researching Godric Gryffindor, but she's not come up with anything so far. All of the books are adamant that Gryffindor's sword is the only remaining relic of his, and Dumbledore was certain that it had been safe and in his office the whole time."

If it wasn't the sword, and there wasn't anything else of Gryffindor's that Tom Riddle could've gotten his hands on...then where did that leave them? "Well then, the snake. Did we find out if Horcruxes could be made from living things?"

"I don't think we've discovered anything new at all about Horcruxes," Harry said with a sigh. "We're limited by Hogwarts' library." A new light went on in his eyes and he looked up at Ron. "Merlin's Beard,

Ron... The next Horcrux will be the fifth. The diary, the ring, the cup and the rod. The next will be the fifth little death."

"From the prophecy?"

"And then it will be a fortnight," Harry said slowly, a look of trepidation in his eyes.

A shiver went down Ron's spine and left him with a cold dread. "And then the darkness will descend."

It was ominous. Ron still recalled Trelawney's creepy, dream-like voice when she said it the first time. And the darkness will descend.

"You think we really destroyed the Horcrux, then?" Ron asked. "We got number four?"

"Moody and Shacklebolt have done an intensive search for it, and have turned up nothing."

"Well," Ron said. "I reckon we should be happy not to have to deal with your scar hurting." The last time Harry had suffered so badly he'd ended up at St. Mungo's.

"I'm not complaining." Harry closed his eyes for a moment and Ron took that as his cue to leave. Regardless of how Harry was feeling, his stamina wasn't anywhere close to what it had once been. Best to let him sleep, Hermione had said on numerous occasions.

Ron collected Jack, and Harry opened his eyes. "Leaving?"

"Time to feed him," Ron said by way of excuse. "We'll be back later."

"Oi," Harry said, stopping him. "Do you know where Hermione is?"

"Dunno," Ron told him. "I expect with Madam Pomfrey."

At that moment Madam Pomfrey came in and produced another potion for Harry to swallow.

"Have you seen Hermione today?" Harry asked the healer once he'd swallowed the contents of her flask. "She didn't come to see me this morning."

"Haven't seen her in a few days," Madam Pomfrey said, distracted by the state of Harry's bedclothes. He's kicked his blankets and sheets down to the bottom of the bed, and she made an effort to straighten them.

"We're not worried, are we?" Ron asked, unsure why Harry was suddenly interested in Hermione's whereabouts. Ron had had breakfast with her that morning, and while she'd been preoccupied – he'd assumed with her potions – she had seemed all right.

"I'm not if you're not," Harry told him. His eyes were beginning to droop. "I'm sure she'll turn up to say hi when she's not busy. It's not like she'd leave the castle, or anything."

Madam Pomfrey chimed in at this point. "Oh, she might've done."

"What?" Ron was surprised by this, and a little startled. "Why?"

"Haven't you seen the Daily Prophet lately?" Madam Pomfrey asked her disapproval. "It's full of scathing reports of Death Eaters and their misdeeds. And it said that Viktor Krum was a Death Eater, and he helped them slaughter his entire family."

"What?" Ron and Harry cried together.

"She was quite distraught over it. I knew she and he were friendly that year we had the Tri-wizard Tournament, but I didn't realize how much. Though, I suppose, I shouldn't have been surprised. He was a very handsome boy, and she was a lovely girl."

"She still is," Harry insisted through a yawn.

"Well, of course, dear. But those scars – never you mind. I'm speaking out of turn." Madam Pomfrey collected her bottle from Harry and breezed away.

"She'd never go to the Prophet, would she? In Diagon Alley? Alone?" Harry asked. "She knows how dangerous it is out there."

Ron's brows furrowed. He honestly didn't know. It wouldn't be sensible to go to the Prophet, but then, Hermione hadn't been her usual sensible self in quite a while. "I think I better go look for her," he told Harry.

"I'll come with you," Harry said and made to swing his legs over the edge of the bed. He didn't even get them to the edge of the thin mattress.

"None of that," Ron said. "Let's not get too worried. I'm sure she's holed up somewhere fuming." He wasn't so sure, really, but Harry was in no shape to be scouring the castle for their wayward friend. "Pomfrey said she hadn't seen her in days, and I saw her this morning." He woke up to her, actually. It was very pleasant. They had fallen asleep talking about Ron's childhood at the Burrow. He'd been able to make her laugh. "I'll find her."

With Jack asleep on his shoulder Ron checked the library, just in case. Then, he looked in her small apartment, and then the Gryffindor's common room. He was headed down to the dungeons when he met McGonagall in passing. She was hurrying along the corridor, and gave Ron a distracted, "Hello," as she passed. Then she stopped and looked back at him.

"Mr. Weasley," she said cordially. "Is that a baby?"

Ron nodded. "He's called Jack. Remus Lupin's son."

"Oh, yes," she said, remembering. She peered down at the baby, and Ron noticed her stern expression softened a little. Jack had that effect on people. "Tell me...does he take after his father?" Her question was pointed.

"You mean the once a month thing? No," Ron assured her. "Tonks didn't have the disease, and so she didn't pass it on to little Jack, here. Actually, he takes after his mother," Ron said happily. "See his eyes?"

McGonagall peered down at Jack's black left eye and orange right one. "I see."

"Mostly it's color change right now, but he's young. I imagine he'll have her talent for physical transformation as well," Ron said happily. And he realized, then, that he was talking about Tonks without the usual grief and remorse swirling in his gut.

"And...you're caring for the child?" she asked, and fiddled with her bun a little. The thought must make her nervous, Ron thought. "Where's Mr. Lupin?"

"Teaching," Ron reminded her. "But really I don't mind. I'm Jack's godfather, after all."

This revelation knocked her back a step. Ron didn't think he'd ever seen her so flummoxed. "You? Really?"

"Yup," Ron told her, ignoring her reaction. "Uh, Professor, you haven't seen Hermione have you?"

She shook her head, her gaze still waffling between Ron and the baby over his shoulder.

"Well, I'm off to find her," he said, and when she didn't respond, he turned and left her there, speechless and in the corridor.

The dungeons were deserted, as one might expect when there were no classes to be held. Ron went straight to the Potions room, in retrospect he thought, the logical place he should've started looking, and Hermione was busy concocting a myriad of potions and brews for whatever might be coming.

Ron threw open the door and found Hermione and Terry Boot hunched over a book together, and reading with some difficulty.

"Two lambs' legs?" Terry asked, and scratched the side of his nose.

"Two lens logs?" Hermione said, questioning her own interpretation. "Why couldn't he write more clearly?"

"Who?" Ron asked.

Both Hermione and Terry looked up, but Terry clearly looked startled and took a large step away from Hermione. She, on the other hand, gave Ron a warm smile. "The Half-blood Prince," she said and then held up the battered book. "Harry told me where he'd hidden it. There were several potions that I thought could help our...situation." She caught herself before she gave too much away in front of Terry.

"So, Terry," Ron said cheerfully. "Potions after class? Slughorn will be impressed by your initiative."

"He's looking for something to help him win a girl. I convinced him that Fred and George's Love Potion wasn't an option. We've been trying to come up with something that might boost his confidence, or catch her eye or something."

"Really? Who's the lucky bird?" Ron asked, maybe a little pointedly, and Terry's guilty eyes flickered anxiously at Hermione and then away. Ron watched as he turned red.

"Erm..." he said. "Well..."

"It's a big secret," Hermione said with a twinkle in her eye. She loved the idea of a secret love, apparently. Ron couldn't believe how dense she was being. She was Hermione, after all. Surely if anyone could see the state Terry was in, it would be her.

"I think I'd like to speak to my girlfriend alone," Ron said, stressing "my" a little more than was absolutely necessary. Terry immediately headed out.

"Er, bye...Hermione," he said just before Ron shut the door behind him.

"He's got a crush on you," Ron told her.

Hermione looked up. "Who? Terry Boot? On me? Don't be silly."

"He's got a crush on you, and well he should," Ron said, echoing what Hermione had said to him over his students. "But don't encourage him."

She waved a dismissive hand in his general direction. "Ridiculous," she told him. "I'm all scarred and bookish. He's more likely to go for your Gretta Sweet." Ron marveled that the thought had simply never occurred to her. Did she really not understand how attractive she was? Had she really missed the longing in Terry's eyes?

"She's not my Gretta Sweet," Ron told her, but she didn't seem to hear him. Her nose was already buried in the book. She picked up a powder and dropped a pinch in the cauldron, and then stirred with a slow, steady hand, counting the strokes as she did so.

"I was worried about you," Ron said at last.

She looked up at him. "Because of Terry? You can't be serious. Oh, honestly, Ron."

"No, of course not. Because of Viktor. Madam Pomfrey told me what the Daily Prophet printed about him."

Her face darkened, and she stared into her potion. "It's just cruel what they do. They'll say anything to sell a paper, regardless of the truth." She looked back at him then, and promised, "But I'm all right."

"Are you still grieving?" They'd made love that once, and with it had come a wonderful physical intimacy between them. But the incident hadn't repeated itself, and Ron was starting to wonder if it ever would. He was hesitant to make the first move again, and even Lupin had agreed that he should wait for her signal. And all week long her signal had been to cuddle up next to him and drop off to sleep - which wasn't bad, just frustrating.

"I don't know," she said, fiddling with the wooden spoon. "I suppose. But I was angrier at what they printed about Viktor. He saved my life!

I feel I owe him something. So, I sent the Daily Prophet a howler, followed by three feet of parchment detailing all of the inaccuracies in their story, and berating them on their lack of journalistic integrity."

"You didn't mention anything to me," Ron said quietly as he crossed the room to her. He shifted Jack to the other shoulder. Her potion was a yellowish green, and smelled like something had died in it.

"I know," she told him, even quieter.

"I want you to be able to talk to me about anything. Even Viktor. If you want." He played with the quill she had beside her parchment full of notes. He loved her handwriting. He ran a finger over a loopy "pallet" and noticed she was watching him. Her hand covered his, and then she pulled him closer. Her arms went around his waist.

"Ron Weasley," she said with a quiet smile. "When will you stop surprising me?"

"Not today," Ron quipped.

They snogged for a good ten minutes with Jackie perched on his shoulder before Hermione finally kicked him out so she could get some work done.

Ron caught up with her and Ginny at supper that evening, eating at the far end of the Gryffindor table with a pale Remus Lupin. He brightened when he saw Ron, and happily took Jack from him. Ron sat next to his sister, spooned a mound of potatoes on his plate, and helped himself to the chicken.

"Harry's come up with a solution to your...furry little problem," Ron said quietly to Lupin around a mouth full of meat. "Room of Requirement."

Lupin nodded. "He said as much. Will you have the dishonor of locking me in?" he asked Ron.

"Right after supper tomorrow night. But, Remus, are you free this evening? The four of us are meeting up in the infirmary at eleven to

go over...matters..." It made Ron nervous to talk about things in the Great Hall where it was impossible to know who might over-hear them.

"I'll be there," Lupin said. "I'm relieved you four are willing to have some outside help. I don't think I need to tell you how...disquieted many of the Order were to hear of your adventure in the Shrieking Shack."

"You're taking about Moody, aren't you?" Ron asked. He could only imagine the rant Moody had once he found out.

"And Kingsley and your brother Bill, among others. Your mother was quite distraught, as well, you know?"

"We've explained to her," Ginny told Lupin. "But she worries."

"She's a mother," Lupin reminded her. "You will understand one day when you have children. And remember, she's already lost your father. It's very difficult to lose someone...as I know you're aware."

Ginny went quiet, and played with her spoon. "She sent an owl yesterday. She's so lonely it makes me want to cry."

"Haven you written your mother?" Hermione pointedly asked Ron.

"What? No! Of course not! You know I don't owl!"

Hermione glared at him. "You might spare a moment for your widowed mother, you know."

"Well, she hasn't spared a moment for her orphaned son, now, has she?"

Rolling her eyes, Hermione stated tersely, "She's your mother. You're not an orphan."

"Yeah, well," Ron said, but then didn't have anything to add after that. He stabbed at his potatoes with his fork. "Why don't you write her?"

"I have," Hermione said quite smugly. "I also got an owl from her yesterday."

"My mother's writing you and not me?" Ron asked, though he didn't know why he was so surprised. "What did she say?"

"That's between her and me," Hermione told him.

"She wrote about me, didn't she?"

"Perhaps."

Ron glowered, and scooped up a lump of potatoes. Hermione was so confident, so sure of her rightness, he just wanted to...

And he did it. He pulled back on his fork a little and sent the ball of mashed potatoes over the table at her. It hit her below her right eye. At first she was shocked, and couldn't respond. Ginny, however, burst into laughter, as did Remus and several other Gryffindors farther down the table.

Hermione took her napkin and carefully wiped away the food from her face and said very tartly, "Well, that was mature." And then she got hit with a second ball of potatoes. This time from Ginny, who'd stolen them from Ron's plate.

"Hey!" Ron said. "You can't do that to my girlfriend!" He scooped up more ammunition and slammed the side of Ginny's head with potatoes. This just made her laugh harder. She reloaded as well, and soon Ron was wearing raisin pudding in his hair. Then a lump of something green flew through the air, and hit the front of Hermione's shirt. Ron stood to see who'd thrown it, and Neville caught him straight between the eyes with a ball of ice cream. Strawberry, his favorite.

There was a moment in the Great Hall where no one moved. And then it passed and everyone seemed to be throwing whatever was left on their plates. There wasn't necessarily any aim involved, just food flying fast and free. Peas, cooked pears, ham, and pumpkin juice all became projectiles. Lupin, laughing, doubled over his son

and hurried out of the room. Ron ran after him. They met just outside in the corridor, laughing and breathless. Ginny and Hermione soon joined them having run hunched together below the level of strikes. Hermione had certainly fared worse than the rest of them, but as more students rushed from the Hall it was clear that many, many others were completely covered.

"Oh, my goodness," McGonagall said as she turned the corner and came into view. Her eyes bugged when she caught sight of all of the students fleeing the Great Hall, and their newest adornments. She hurried to the enormous doors, threw them open with a flick of her wand, and got squarely hit in the face by a bowl of gelatin. Lime, from the color of it.

Harry was jealous, of course, when they told him about the food fight that night, but he smiled and laughed along with the rest of them as they relayed the story.

"And what happened after McGonagall got hit?" Harry asked. "Did it stop?"

"Hardly!" Ginny said, and broke out in another fit of giggles. "If anything it got worse!"

"The ghosts had to put an end to it," Hermione volunteered. "They were the only one's who couldn't get hit!"

They all laughed, and Ron couldn't believe how good it felt – or how long it had been. He tried to think back to a time when they were all laughing like this together, and couldn't come up with one. They needed more of this. They deserved it.

Lupin brought them all back to why they were there. "Ron said that you were able to figure out part of the new prophecy," Remus said to Harry.

"Yes," Harry confirmed, though he was hesitant to lose his smile. When at last he sobered enough he added: "The part about the five little deaths. I don't think it means what you think it means, Hermione.

I think it's talking about the Horcruxes. And it's the fifth Horcrux that will be important."

"What was the line again?" Hermione asked Ginny.

"The time will be selected by the fifth little death. A fortnight more before the darkness will descend."

"If destroying the Horcruxes is, indeed, killing off pieces of Voldemort's soul, then your interpretation is more sensible than mine," Hermione conceded. "So, you were thinking two weeks after you destroy the fifth Horcrux?"

"Two weeks and then what?" Lupin asked.

"The big battle," Harry told him.

A scream startled them all, and set Jack to crying on his father's lap. Lupin immediately pushed him against Ron and rushed to the door, his wand drawn. Hermione and Ginny followed close on his heels.

"Where's my wand?" Harry asked, scanning the table beside his bed.

"Dunno, mate. Here." He tossed his at Harry, but Harry handed it back.

"You've got Jack. You need to protect him."

"From what?" Ron asked. His heart was starting to thump quite wildly.

"I don't know," Harry told him, and pushed his legs over the side of the bed, "but something's not right."

Ron could feel it, too, now. There was a cold stillness in the air, a sense of foreboding.

"Stay here," Harry told him.

"I've got to stay with you – if something's wrong."

"You've got Jack," Harry said again. He wobbled on his feet and then, started toward the door.

"Was that Madam Pomfrey?" Ron called after him. "That scream?"

Harry didn't turn back when he said, "Yes, I'm afraid so."

The sounds of blasts came from just down the corridor. Ron gripped his wand in one hand, and held a wailing Jack against his chest with the other. A flash of red caught his eye and he turned to look out the tall, gothic windows. Gryffindor Tower was ablaze! Even through the stained glass it was impossible to mistake the flames that licked out the narrow Gryffindor windows. His heart stopped for a beat.

The infirmary door slammed open and Ron aimed, but luckily his voice got stuck in his dry throat. Hermione and Ginny, dragging Harry between them, rushed in. The deposited him on the nearest bed, and then ran out again. Ron went to his friend's side.

"You OK?"

"Weak," Harry bit out angrily. "Useless!"

"Gryffindor Tower's on fire," Ron told him.

Harry's head whipped to the windows. "Blast it all! Ron, you've got to give me some energy."

Everyone from Moody and Lupin to Madam Pomfrey had been adamant that Ron not give Harry any magic under any circumstances, as it could very well hamper his already slow recovery. And everyone needed Harry to full strength as fast as possible. But no one had foreseen this.

"It's the Death Eaters, isn't it?" Ron asked.

"Pomfrey's dead," Harry said. "Lupin got the wizard who killed her, but there are more. And now Gryffindor Tower's on fire. We've got to help, Ron. There are students in there – Dumbledore's papers!"

Harry was very compelling. And Ron looked down at the crying baby in his arms. "Here," he said, and handed Jack over. Then he pressed his wand into Harry's hand. "Protect them," he said to the wand, and a green net of magic flared over the wand and Harry's hand. Hadn't it once been gold? Ron wondered. He seemed to remember his wand in Hermione's hand, and a gold shimmer coming off the Transfer Spell. Not that it mattered.

Harry immediately protested, but Ron ignored him. He knew what he had to do. Harry was right. There were students in Gryffindor Tower, and they couldn't afford to lose Dumbledore's journals.

The corridors were empty, and as Ron hurried away from the infirmary he came across Madam Pomfrey's body...both pieces. He couldn't let it slow him, so he focused on getting to Gryffindor and began to run. As he turned another corner he ran into a skirmish between Hermione, Lupin and three Death Eaters in black robes and hoods. Ron ducked just in time and the Cutting Curse thrown at him missed, destroying the tapestry just behind him.

"Ron!" It was Hermione's surprised voice. "Why aren't you back in the Infirmary?"

"Gryffindor's on fire!"

"What?" she gasped, and turned to him. In the next second one of the Death Eaters took aim, and it was Ron's lucky leap that knocked her out of the way at the last second. They landed hard on the stone floor. Ron rolled, and pulled her with him, behind a large pedestal supporting an enormous vase.

"Where's your wand?" she whispered, somewhat breathlessly at him.

"Harry's got it."

"You're unarmed?"

"He's got Jack," Ron said, and then peeked out from their hiding place. Lupin downed one of the robed intruders, and was now working on the second. "I've got to get to Gryffindor. Cover me."

"But wandless? What are you going to do? Blow the fire out?"

"I'm going to get Dumbledore's things," he told her through clenched teeth. Honestly, couldn't they row later? "Now, on the count of three-"

"You're staying with me!" she insisted. "You're not going anywhere wandless!"

"Is that a new frock?" Ron asked her.

Stunned, she looked down at her top. "Well, uh...yes, as a matter of fact-"

"You look smashing." He kissed her firmly on the mouth and said, "THREE!"

He jumped up and bolted for the far end of the hall, and even though Hermione protested she covered his escape. He hated leaving her, but he figured as he was wandless, she was far better off with Remus. Besides, Hermione was more than capable of casting any number of spells and hexes, and most far better than Ron.

Three more corridors, and on to the Tower's stair, and once again Ron thought Rowena Ravenclaw a sadist for making them so difficult. He remembered at the last instant to miss the disappearing step, and sprinted up as fast as his legs would carry him, fighting throngs of yelling, screaming students on their way down. At least it looked like everyone was getting out.

"Ron!" It was Neville. "The fire's in the common room!"

"Did everyone get out?"

"No idea," Neville shouted to him. "I got swept away." And then he was pulled with the current of students right past Ron.

Ron continued to fight his way up. He needed to get to the guest quarters off the seventh floor corridor. He saw Seamus and Luna, neither of whom seemed to see him. Even the portrait subjects were

rushing down the staircase from frame to frame. Ron was pushed back a couple of steps by some first years, their eyes wide with terror. That was when Ron saw them at the top of the stairs, looking down from the seventh floor landing. Death Eaters. Four of them. With all the screaming and crying around him he couldn't be sure, but they looked as if they were laughing. Until one saw him, that is, and then they were pointing directly at Ron, and pushing their way past students on their way down.

They knew him, and they were after him! Death Eaters, for casting out loud, were after him! Ron turned and bolted down the staircase as fast as he could manage. When he had to wait on one platform for the stairs to arrive, he saw three small students two platforms below fall as their staircase moved out from under them. Without thinking he snatched a wand off of a passing first year, aimed and yelled: "Arresto momentum!" The three children came to an almost instant hovering stop, and Ron lowered them to the next landing.

Then he glanced back over his shoulder. If he was caught there was no telling what kind of information they'd extract from him – or what they'd do to him if they found out about his Smisurato abilities. They were making headway; the stairs always seemed to arrive just as they needed them to. Ron ducked between students, determined to make himself a difficult target.

On the next landing he dove through a door, and his shoulder broke his fall. Clutching it he pushed himself up off the carpet and ran down the corridor as fast as he could manage. Third floor, he told himself. Charms, armor gallery, Trophy Room, Forbidden Corridor. Ron was very familiar with this floor. He hit the fork in the hall, and turned left back toward the hospital wing. He needed to find Lupin again. He was fairly sure one of those Death Eaters had been Lucius Malfoy.

In front of him three people rounded the corner, and stopped with their wands drawn. "Halt!" one called, and Ron recognized her as Claudia Waddinton, the new Headmistress. So, this was the Ministry's extended protection detail. Pathetic.

"I'm Ron Weasley," he told them, hands up above his head. He did stop, but glanced nervously behind him. "I've got four Death Eaters hot on my heels! And there they are!"

"Down!" the Headmistress commanded, and Ron dropped to the floor without a second thought.

Shots flew over his head from both sides. Two collided just above him and a shower of magic rained down. Ron covered his head, and then asked himself a panicked, "What the bloody hell am I doing?" He rolled to one side, aimed down past his feet, and Petrified the closest Death Eater square in the face. Ron barely managed to roll to his other side before another Death Eater blew a hole in the carpet and stone floor.

The three Ministry agents fought hard, and in the end they were able to Stun and Disarm all four of the Death Eaters. Once the last went down, Ron was up and running.

"Wait!" the Headmistress demanded.

"Gryffindor Tower is on fire!" Ron called back, turning to do so, but still running all the same. "I wasn't able to get close enough to see if everyone made it out!" That got the three of them running toward the tower. Ron went the other way.

He was almost to the infirmary corridor when the smell of charred flesh and cloth hit him like a Bludger. A moment later he practically tripped over the burned body. Ron slowed enough to notice a form against the wall, and then to realize it was Ginny. He slid to his knees beside her. Her legs were drawn up against her chest, her wand clutched between both hands and her stomach. Her eyes stared widely at the body in the middle of the hall.

"Ginny-" he began.

"I killed him," she whispered. He almost didn't catch her words.

"Ginny, look at me." He had to tug her chin to get her gaze to meet his. The hall was dark, and the blue light shining in from the windows

glinted in her dark eyes. "It was you or him. You did what you had to do."

"But I killed him!" she insisted. Her voice sounded oddly hollow. "He's Goyle's father, and I killed him. He started to say the Killing Curse, and I didn't have time to think. Incendio was the first thing that came into my head, and I burned him up."

"No," Ron told her firmly. "Ginny look at me!" Her empty gaze found him again. "Take this wand," he ordered and pulled hers out of her hand, replaced it with the first year's he'd commandeered. "This is your wand now. If anyone asks, this is your wand-"

"This...this isn't your wand," she said.

"No," he admitted.

"They'll know it's not mine. They'll know it's registered to someone else."

"It'll never go that far," he assured her. Goyle had been a Death Eater, after all. Would anyone check that hard for his killer? "They'll use Prior Incantato to find out what the last spell the wand cast. This is your wand now."

She looked at it, but he wasn't sure she truly understood what he was saying. And her shock was understandable. For a time Ron had thought he'd killed Draco Malfoy, and he easily empathized with the anguish his little sister was experiencing. He also knew there was nothing he could do to help. Wrapping an arm around her shoulder he helped her up and led her back to the Infirmary, turning her head so as to not see Madam Pomfrey's remains.

Harry nearly jumped out of his skin when he saw her, and Ron sat her down beside him on the bed. Ron briefed Harry on what had happened, and then when Harry said he'd not seen the others, Ron touched Jack's soft, round head, and went back out.

He needed to find Lupin and Hermione. He needed to get rid of Ginny's wand.

The sounds of fighting led Ron down to the inner courtyard between the four house towers. From there, Ron could see the roaring fire in Gryffindor Tower overhead; the entire courtyard was lit by it. There were five Death Eaters in their black robes that were retreating back through the West Tower, and after that most certainly they'd escape across the lawns and through the main gates back to Hogsmeade. Professors McGonagall, Flitwick, and Sprout were there blasting hex after hex at the Death Eaters, as well as Lupin, Hermione and Neville. The six of them had the Death Eaters outnumbered, but not necessarily out-powered. Ron raised Ginny's wand and sent Protego at one of the Death Eaters, but not fast enough. The Death Eater's hex didn't rebound back on himself, but instead hit McGonagall in the stomach. She went down like a rag doll. Hermione was on it, though, and dashed out a fast: "Rennervate!" at her. McGonagall came to instantly, but the Death Eater had already taken aim at Hermione.

Ron shouted, "Locomotor mortis!" and thrust his wand at the man before he even knew what he was doing. The Death Eater fell forward on his face, which gave Hermione enough time to Stun him.

By this time Lupin and Flitwick had another Death Eater disarmed, and the remaining three had fled. Cothwaith, the Ministry's DADA professor, and Waddington emerged from behind Ron, and he pointed the way the Death Eaters had fled, before heading over to Hermione. When she saw him, she ran to him, and they slammed into each other in a desperate embrace.

"You're all right?" she asked.

He nodded. "You?"

She was good, he realized, as was Lupin, who was helping McGonagall up from the ground. "I'm far too old to be doing this," she sputtered. Lupin agreed that he was, as well.

"Ginny and Harry?" Hermione asked, turning back to Ron.

"They're good. But Hermione..." He took her by the arm and pulled her away from the others. "Ginny killed a Death Eater. She burned him alive."

"No!" Hermione's hands flew to her mouth and nose. "Is she all right?"

"No. I mean yes, physically. But we have to get rid of her wand. It's not an Unforgivable, so they won't know who cast it, just that an under-aged wizard inside Hogwarts Castle did it. And that could be anyone."

Hermione stared down at Ginny's wand. He could see her inner turmoil play out on her face; weighing what she knew had to be done against breaking the law. "We have to protect Ginny," she said, as he knew she would. But could she bring herself to help him destroy evidence? Would she?

"I shouldn't have told you," Ron said quickly and shoved the wand into his back pocket. "I never should've involved you-"

"Ron, no. You need my help."

"I've made you guilty by association," he said, and backed up a couple of steps. "I'm sorry." He was supposed to protect her, not involve her in crimes.

"We'll have to break it and then burn it," Hermione told him. "It has to be snapped first."

"I'll do it," Ron told her.

"I'll help."

He shook his head. "Go back to the infirmary. Help Ginny, she's in shock. I left Harry there with both her and Jack to protect, and he's still not got the energy to stand on his own."

"But-" Hermione protested.

"I'll do this and be right up."

"What's going on?" Lupin asked, hurrying over to them. "Everything all right? Hermione?"

"Everything's fine," she told him, with a smile that screamed she was lying.

"I'll be right up," Ron repeated, and then turned to leave. He could do it in the greenhouses, and then bury the ashes in the compost bins.

"You'll need my wand," Hermione called after him, and then rushed to him and pressed it into his hand. "You gave yours to Ginny, didn't you?"

To Harry, he thought, but it hardly mattered. "You need it," he told her.

"I'll stay close to Lupin," she promised. "The Death Eaters are gone, and it's safe enough now--"

A large rumble, filled the air and over-powered her voice, and Ron looked up to see the top of Gryffindor Tower fall in on itself. A huge shower of fire rained down, and then the entire tower began to fail.

"RUN!" Lupin screamed. Flitwick and McGonagall were already racing in the other direction.

Ron grabbed Hermione and they sprinted back through the West Tower, and into the Roman Courtyard, past the Transfigurations classroom and through the Dark Tower. He pulled Hermione with him into the garden, and then into the first greenhouse they came to. Ron threw Ginny's wand on the dirt floor and held out his hand. "Give me your wand," he told her.

"I'll do it," she said, staring down at Ginny's wand. But he didn't want her to. If someone found out about this, he wanted to be able to take the blame.

Before he had a chance to voice this, Lupin caught up with them. He burst into the greenhouse and collapsed forward, hands on his thighs,

chest heaving with the difficulty of catching his breath. "What are...you...doing...in here?"

"Remus," Ron said. "You need to leave."

He looked up at Ron, then, and into his eyes. Lupin's face went stern. "What are...you doing?" he repeated.

Again, Ron told him, "You need to leave."

Lupin shook his head. He looked down at Ginny's wand and then back up at Ron. "What's...happened?"

Ron never got a chance to refuse to answer. A roar so loud Ron thought his head might explode blew over them, and he managed to throw himself over Hermione and knock her to the ground before the glass roof of the greenhouse blew in on top of them. Stones and ash covered them like a hot blanket. He buried his face in her hair. They were pelted with any number of objects, and the debris seemed to fall for the longest time.

Even before it stopped Lupin was screaming: "Ron! Are you there?" He'd been thrown across the rows of plants.

Ron felt Hermione breathing below him. She was alive, at least. "We're here!" Ron screamed back. He could barely hear his own voice.

When at last the tower finished falling, Ron pushed himself up, and then helped Hermione to her feet. She yelped when he touched her arm. Undoubtedly it was broken. Ginny's wand had snapped beneath their weight, but luckily it hadn't impaled Hermione's soft stomach. Had it...Ron didn't want to think about that. He couldn't deal with thoughts of mortality now.

Hermione saw what he was staring at, and she gingerly pulled her own wand out. He could tell she hurt – more than just her arm – by the way she moved. Ron was hurting, too. Everything ached, and his muscles protested every move he made. He didn't flinch when she set the wand on fire. In the hazy, ash-filled air it was nothing more

than a small orange glow. The unicorn hair at its center shriveled and then whined as it died. Hermione made a similar noise. She looked up at Ron, her face, hair, and everything completely covered with grey-black ash. It was hard to see any expression under all that dust, but her eyes – her eyes were full of such anguish. She shied away from his touch.

"Lupin," she said, and turned. She was right. The emotions could wait until later.

They found Lupin buried under a few large stones and a table of ginger plants. Hermione used her wand to dig him out, and then turned it on herself and knitted the bones in her arm. They'd been lucky, Ron knew, and he helped Remus up from the ground.

The Gryffindor Tower now blocked most of the central courtyard, and the three of them had to take the long way around to make it back to the infirmary. Hermione had a nasty cut on her shoulder, but she waved off his concern.

"We need to get to Harry and Ginny, and then we need to get the infirmary ready for all of the wounded. There were most certainly students and teacher hurt when the tower came down, and with Madam Pomfrey gone someone's going to need to help them."

"Good thinking," Lupin said as they rushed along another deserted corridor. "I'll work with the Headmistress to figure out the fastest way to get the critical cases directly to St. Mungo's."

"We also need to get the students home," Hermione said briskly. "It's obvious Hogwarts isn't safe any longer-"

"Jack!" Lupin said and looked to Ron. Had he just remembered his son? Or just realized that Ron didn't have him?

"He's safe," Ron assured him.

"I gave him to you to protect," Lupin said darkly and they hurriedly walked.

"And I gave him to Harry. Harry is a better protector against Death Eaters, you and I both know that."

"Harry can't even lift his wand!"

"He's safe," Ron said again, this time sharper. Did Lupin think he'd just hand Jack over to anyone? Or leave him in danger? "I did what I had to do. Just as you did. And Jack's safe."

Remus clenched his teeth, but didn't retort. Ron could tell that the argument wasn't over. They were all hurting and reeling from the events of that night, and it had to be close to three in the morning. They would most certainly continue it once they had a chance to breathe a little. Ron was still shaking. For now he couldn't deal with anything more than making it back to Harry and reassuring himself that Jack was, in fact, safe.

Half of the stained-glass windows on one side of the infirmary had been blown in, and when Ron, Lupin and Hermione made it back there they found Harry and Ginny huddled together on the opposite side of the room with an overturned bed in front of them like a barricade. Harry looked up, a bundled baby against his chest, and Ginny whirled to them, her wand drawn and fury in her eyes. All three of them stopped short when she didn't lower her wand. Harry touched the back of her leg. "We're all right," he told her. "We're safe now." She relaxed only a little. And slowly.

When Ginny did lowered her arm, Hermione rushed past her to Harry.

"Are you good?" they asked each other.

Lupin took his son, and hurried to the next bed to inspect him for any possible injuries. Jack cooed, softly, so Ron knew he was all right. Tears prickled his eyes. He was simply relieved that they'd all made it out relatively unscathed. It had been a close thing. It could've ended much differently.

The rest of the night and the following day Hermione, Lupin and McGonagall tended to the walking wounded. Waddington closed the school, and arranged for the Hogwarts Express to take the students

back. Two students had died. And Madam Pomfrey. And three Death Eaters. The remainder of the captured Death Eaters were taken to the Ministry. Azkaban was no longer invulnerable. Ron told Kingsley about Lucius Malfoy. Shacklebolt didn't look surprised.

Regardless of the transportation arrangements made, parents started arriving as soon as the sun came up. Most of the students were terrified and ready to leave immediately - especially the Gryffindors, who had nothing left to pack.

Hermione's apartment was lost, too, and with it everything that once belonged to Dumbledore.

The evening after Gryffindor Tower collapsed, Ron and Hermione sat on a cushion near the fireplace, as did Lupin with Jack, and Harry and Ginny. Hagrid had a large stool not too far away and spoke quietly with Firenze and Mistress Sprout. McGonagall, with her hair and clothes once again pristine, had a low arm chair. Beside her in their own chairs were Bill Weasley, Kingsley Shacklebolt, and Moody, who seemed royally upset that he'd missed the whole thing. Of course, Waddington and the other two ministry workers were there as well; Cothwaith and Kriskin, respectively. It was a full room.

"The charms and protections failed," Waddington began.

"They were using a new magic!" Cothwaith complained. "Nothing I've ever seen before! One of them didn't even use a wand! And Die? What kind of magic is that?"

"The kind that killed my father," Ron told him.

They all looked at him, though Ron doubted many of them actually saw him. They were reliving that horrible moment at Hermione's trial when Draco had murdered his father without a wand, and Muffled.

"Die, Obey, Hurt – they're not Unforgivables," McGonagall said. "I'm sure that is why those spells were allowed to work on Hogwarts' grounds. Our protections didn't necessarily fail - they've just found a way around them."

"But these are not powerful wizards," Shacklebolt said with a shake of his bald head. "Goyle? Yaxley? My five year-old nephew could take them down."

Ron saw Ginny go green, and she turned to look into the fire. No one knew what she'd done beyond Hermione and him. Perhaps Remus had an idea.

"How are they getting their power? Where is this new magic coming from?"

"Voldemort, of course," Harry said. Most everyone in the room flinched from the name. "The real question is, how do we defend ourselves from it? What's the counter-curse to Obey or Hurt or Die? At least with The Killing Curse there was some warning. It's a mouthful to say. And even then, it didn't take any time at all for Pettigrew to kill Cedric Diggory."

"Why did they come here?" Ginny asked. "What did they want?"

"Us," Ron said. He remembered how the Death Eaters had acted once they saw him. "Or maybe Harry," he corrected. "There were four Death Eaters at Gryffindor Tower. If they were looking for Harry..."

"But I wasn't in Gryffindor Tower."

Ron shrugged. "Maybe they didn't know that."

"They wanted to scare us," Hermione said. "This was their show of power. In one night they destroyed half of the castle, closed down the school, and hit Harry where he was hiding."

"I was never hiding!" Harry insisted.

"They came," Hermione continued, "because we've gotten too close to Voldemort, and they need to set us back."

"Set us back?" Ron asked. "But that would only make sense if they were stalling for more time. Why would they do that? Unless..." It was

possible, he thought. Wasn't it? "Voldemort's looking for the locket, too. He's trying to get it back."

"Locket?" Waddington demanded. She sat forward in her chair, as did the other Ministry officials. "What locket?"

Lupin sat forward as well. "If that's the case, then they don't know where it is, either."

"Which locket?" Waddington asked again, her strong, sharp voice going a little shrill.

"Back to Headquarters?" Lupin asked.

"I don't think so," Harry said. "It's got to be here."

"It does?" Ron asked. "But what about the Death Eaters? They know we're here now."

Harry studied him for a moment. "You're right. Everyone should go back to Headquarters. But I can't. I have to be here."

"Because of the prophecy," Hermione said slowly. Harry nodded. "Because this is the only place that both you and Voldemort have called home. Because Hogwarts is the place of beginnings and ends."

"It started here when Tom Riddle was a student," Harry explained. "It will end here before I was meant to graduate."

"Who's Tom Riddle," Cothwaith asked. "What is he going on about?"

"You're sure about that?" Hermione asked. "It says a fortnight from the fifth little death, not from when you were supposed to graduate. That's only two months away-"

"Well, then," Harry said, and gave her a resigned smile. "We'd best hurry."

As they made their way back to Ravenclaw Tower, Ron pulled Hermione to the side and inhaled deeply. He'd missed her smell. He

couldn't hold back any longer, Lupin's advice be damned. "I want to be alone with you," he whispered. She looked up at him with exhausted eyes, and nodded.

They ducked to the library where Madam Pince still slid books back on to the shelves. Ron told her the school was closed, but she shushed him and went back to her sorting.

"This way," Hermione said, and led him by the hand to the fourth floor, and the Prefect's Bathroom. Just inside the door she leaned into him and kissed him deeply. It was just what he needed. He touched her face as his tongue dove deep into her mouth. She was alive, and he was alive, and as weary and exhausted as he was he wanted to touch her all over. He skimmed his fingers over her ribs.

When she pulled away, she pressed a hand to his chest. "Stay," she said with a mischievous grin. He watched the swing of her hips as she sauntered over to the bath valves and turned on the water. He'd never known her to saunter before.

Pink and blue soap also poured out of the faucets, and bubbles began to form like a thick froth on the top of the water. She turned to him, then, in front of the enormous bath, and began to unbutton her blouse.

Ron's heart skipped a beat. Her top dropped to the floor, and his mouth went dry. She unbuttoned her jeans, slid them down her legs. In nothing but her knickers and bra she stood before him and extended her hand to him. Her wand shot into it. With a look of frustration she tossed the wand aside and motioned for him to join her. He took her hand in his, kissed her again, and let her pull his t-shirt up and over his head. She had to strain on tip-toes and press her body tightly against his to lift his shirt up over his head. He slipped his arms out of the shirt, and then around her body. Then he kissed her again.

He felt a tugging at his jeans, and realized she had them undone and was trying to push them down his legs. He loved that she took the initiative. It made him want her even more. He slipped his hand down

her side and under her knickers, and groped her firm bum tightly, and pulled her lower body against him. He loved the feel of her; full in his palms. Warm. Smooth and rough. He drew her tighter and pressed himself into her soft belly. Her hands abandoned his clothes, then, and skimmed across his chest raising goose bumps in their wake. Her mouth wandered across his jaw, and then his neck. He focused on her bum. She moaned, and his body responded even more. He stifled a groan against her shoulder.

"Oh, my!" came a shriek from the toilets. Moaning Myrtle.

"Get out," Ron snapped before going back to Hermione's neck. Her skin actually tasted faintly sweet.

"Out!" Hermione concurred.

Ron reached up and squeezed one of her breasts, and then slipped his fingers inside the fabric cup, but was distracted by Hermione's roaming hands. They wiggled down the front of his drawers and found him straining. He gasped, bucked against her hand. The overpowering sensation ignited a storm in his belly. He heard himself whimper, inside it felt like a roar.

He pushed his own clothes off while she held him in one hand, and then he pulled her bra up without bothering with the tiny clasp. It got stuck under her arms, her breasts bobbed freely, and she had to let go of him to help him pull the whole bra contraption up and over her shoulders. It was better that she let go, he realized. He could think a little more clearly. Not much, but a little.

He watched as she pushed her knickers down off her hips. There was no modesty between them any longer. Then she pulled him by the hand into the warm, sudsy water. They sank down together into the bath's depths. She was on him in a second; hot, wet, slippery, and laughing. Her arms around his neck, her thighs around his hips, and it was all he could do to kiss her and brace himself against the central island in the tub. Her hips worked, pressed against him, and he throbbed between their two bodies. He reached down and tried to find the right position against her. She had to help. And when he was

pressing at her core, he took a deep breath and pushed up inside her while she purposefully sank down around him.

There was no leverage, though, and he tried to push her up against the pipes. When she violently complained he went back to the steps and sat with her on top of him. It was a position he knew she liked. With her weight in his lap, he found the resistance he needed to thrust up into her. His hands spanned her hips, and he helped her as she rocked above him.

"Find a rhythm," she whispered hotly in his ear.

Steam from the water left him flush and sweating...or maybe that was her. His heart hammered, his body throbbed, his hips searched desperately for that give and take. She leaned down and kissed his mouth, his jaw. Her hands left his shoulder to tightly grip his thighs. She pulled as she pushed down on to him, and he took her cue. He thrust up as she pressed down, and bucked as she did. It was a cadence that he should've known all along, a beat that echoed within his blood. Her nails skimmed over him, beneath the water, and raised goose bumps in their wake. He fondled clumsily at her bobbing breasts, her belly, her bum; his hands having lost their subtlety.

"Ron," she whispered, or at least he thought she did. He'd closed his eyes to focus on what his body was feeling and it seemed to have affected his hearing. When she repeated his name he looked up at her, flushed and pink. Beautiful. She was absolutely beautiful.

She took his hand and led his thumb down between their bodies, to that special place she'd shown him before. When he pressed, she gripped his shoulders, and her face twisted in pain. No, no pain. Pleasure. He worked her as he moved inside her, and she did her very best to speed his hips along. He didn't want to rush, though. Every move of her body was absolute ecstasy; every gasp from her throat was perfection.

"To the left," she whispered, and then, "No, my left." And as he complied she rested her forehead against his neck. Her body tensed. He could feel her straining. He continued to move inside her, continued his manual onslaught, and the attempt to find the

connection between the two. Honestly, he couldn't have stopped even if he wanted to. Her tight heat grew even tighter, and Ron grunted as his hips had to work harder. The added pressure was added pleasure, and still he wanted even more. The cold within his well was made even colder by the heat of her body and the bath that surrounded them, and he pulled that cold up. He reached into her with his magic, and as he plunged within her she cried out, went stiff in his arms.

With her magic swirling with his, Ron was no longer able to resist the inevitable. He allowed his pressure to build, and pushed rougher inside her to help it along. He crested with a grunt and a series of thrusts, and her lips on his, and her magic inside him. He floated in a haze of complete physical satisfaction, but his brain didn't stop completely. How had her magic found its way into his well? It had always worked the other way before. Would the exchange hurt her the way it had with Harry so very long ago?

She collapsed against him, but she was far from unconscious. Her hands crept down his sides and tickled lightly at the base of his spine. He was sure she would've gone lower had he not been sitting on it. He kissed her temple. Kissed the top of her head, and brought a wet hand up to smooth over her hair. She sighed happily. It was a wonderful sound. Her body was still responding, still clutching, and her magic was still swirling lightly on the surface of his well, while his was on hers. His body was retreating, yes, but he continued to tease her energy with his – it felt too good to stop.

"Why isn't this hurting you?" he whispered to her. "When you gave energy to Harry it hurt you."

"You're not Harry," she told him simply.

"And Harry took, didn't he? He always does with me. But our energies are just...playing. That's the difference, do you think?"

"I think so. It certainly feels different with you. Everything feels different with you." He could feel her smile against his shoulder. She kissed his neck.

"Because my magic's not pure? Can you feel that?" he asked.

"I feel everything," she said. "And I love you, too."

End of chapter 19

Chapter 20- The Fifth Little Death

The Great Hall was still the Great Hall just without the activity and noise of students. Much of the castle felt different now that Hogwarts was officially closed, and Gryffindor Tower lay in charred ruins across the central courtyard and much of the Western Quad. The Dark Tower took some of the brunt of the ancient falling stone as well, and now it leaned precariously to one side. But the Great Hall was intact, if quiet.

A call had gone out to Order members. Hogwarts had been breached, and the new reality that no place was out of the Death Eaters' grasp any longer had settled anxiously over the whole of Britain. Not safe at home any longer, many more had responded than Ron had anticipated. Even Ron's mum had come, much to his discontent. But, as Hermione pointed out, until they found and destroyed the fifth Horcrux, Darkness probably wouldn't be descending on Hogwarts, and his mother was more safe there surrounded by Order than at the Burrow. Probably. He tried to put his apprehension behind that, and ignore the vacant space in the castlescape where Gryffindor once stood.

"So, where's young Hermione on this fine day?" Hagrid asked, abandoning his heavy wooden spoon in his enormous bowl of porridge.

"Potions, I expect," Ron said. She'd been gone when he woke up that morning, and he missed his early morning snog. They all got up early now, of course, there was simply too much to be done, but Hermione was at her potions day and night, making strengthening draughts for Harry, and protective serums for the upcoming battle that always loomed in the backs of their minds.

"With Marchbanks?" Hagrid asked. Madam Griselda Marchbanks, had been an elder Wizengamot with Dumbledore, and had overseen much of Ron and Harry's O.W.L. testing back in fifth year. Ron wasn't sure if she was officially Order or not, but he knew that her name had been smeared along with Harry and Dumbledore's back in fifth year, and that she resigned from the Wizengamot when Umbridge was put

in charge of Hogwarts, so she was all right in his book. Plus, she was brilliant at Potions.

"And Shacklebolt," Ron told him.

Shacklebolt and Moody had spent many hours devising defensive strategies for Order protection now that Hogwarts had been compromised, and one of the new rules was that no witch or wizard would ever be in groups less than three. A rule, while sound strategically speaking, meant that intimacy was next to impossible - even if they had the energy at the end of the day, which many nights Hermione didn't. Ron's frustration level rose exponentially every morning.

"Where are you off to today?" Ron asked, hoping to change the subject enough to think about anything but Hermione and her lips on him. "Anyplace exciting?"

"Got a list," Hagrid said happily, and pulled a folded piece of parchment from his coat pocket. Ron recognized the perfect, loopy script as his girlfriend's. "Potion ingredients, more bandages – still stocking up I suppose. I expect I'll find much of what we need in Hogsmeade, but I may go down to Edinburgh and take a stroll through Lynonvar Close. Diagon Alley being all Death Eater, and all."

Lupin sat down heavily next to Ron with Jack in a sling around his neck and chest. He dropped the Daily Prophet on the table with a grim look. "Have you seen?" he asked.

Ron hadn't. The headline read, "SCRIMGGEOR TAKES WELL-DESERVED HOLIDAY." The photo beneath it was the hairy Minister in one-piece swimming trunks and water goggles pretending to dive into the ocean.

"Back page," Lupin said flipping the paper over. "At the bottom. Hidden between the article about proper owl care and the heat wave over Wales."

Ron leaned in and squinted at the tiny, waving font. "'Inferi – Latin for 'the dead' – have driven out the entire towns of Dover, Skegness and

Kingston upon Hull creating havoc within the Ministry. The Obliviators and the Muggle-Worthy Excuse Committee are working over time to contain the damage. When asked if these recent attacks from the dead are linked in any way to the vampire attacks in Builth Wells Monday last, or the Werewolf maulings in Cumnock and New Cumnock respectively, the Minister responded with, 'I'm sorry, the Minister cannot be reached,' before slamming the door on this reporter. The Ministry's Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes has also declined to comment."

"The dead are walking," Lupin said ominously. "And they're walking this way. He's building his army."

"An' scaring the bejeezus out of the country in the process," Hagrid added.

"It doesn't sound like the Ministry is doing anything about it, either," Ron said darkly.

"I'm not certain there is much they could do," Lupin told him. "They've outlawed Dark Magic so long ago that the vast majority of wizards know nothing whatsoever about it. And those that do, well, they've been alienated by the Ministry, and so have gladly joined the other side. There isn't a person left in the Ministry that knows how to create an inferius any longer, let alone how to battle them. And they've driven the half-breeds out as well. I can tell you that nearly all of the werewolves that have joined Voldemort have done it out of self-preservation. They don't understand that he'll wipe them out himself as soon as he doesn't need them anymore."

"I know someone who does know how to battle the inferius and is also friendly with a vampire or two." Ron looked up to see Harry, pale and grey, swaying a little on his feet. He was supposed to be in bed. "Horace Slughorn."

"That's right!" Ron recalled Harry saying he also knew about Horcruxes.

"Trouble is, he'll have gone back into hiding," Harry told them, and then slumped down on the bench next to Hagrid, who offered him his

breakfast bowl. Harry declined. "Dumbledore knew how to find him. He's probably a coffee table by now."

"Moody's good at tracking people," Lupin offered. This was, of course, an understatement. While he was an Auror with the Ministry, Moody was legendary for tracking and capturing dark wizards.

"Does Hermione know you're out of bed?" Ron quietly asked Harry from across the table.

"It's none of her business what I do," he said defensively.

"All right, mate. I just don't want her cross at me because you didn't stay put."

"I'm feeling better," Harry told him. "The draughts she's been feeding me have helped. I just can't sit in that bed anymore."

"You're not casting," Lupin asked, having overheard.

"I'm not," Harry confirmed. They all cautioned him not to spend any energy while his reserves were still low. And, while it would have driven Ron mad to refrain from casting, Harry seemed to take to it easy enough.

Moody, Ginny and Professor Flitwick came in then, looking like a motley crew. They'd been in the library, as far as Ron knew, quizzing Madam Pince on Slytherin and his locket, and the possible identity of RAB. The fact that they didn't carry any books or rolls of parchments with them was disheartening.

When Ginny saw Harry her eyes flared in frustration, but he had the good sense to look sheepish about him being out of bed, and Ginny couldn't seem to resist. She sat next to him, kissed him lightly on the cheek, and pulled a small bowl of porridge from the central tray.

"No luck?" Harry asked. Moody took the seat on the other side of Lupin, and tucked into breakfast as well. Flitwick toddled down the aisle past them and climbed up on the bench next to McGonagall and an Order member called Elphias Doge, who Ron recalled had kept

surveillance on the Malfoy Mansion during Hermione's kidnapping and hearing. On the other side of him was Dedalus Diggle and the squib Mrs. Figg, who had collected some clothes for Hermione and Ginny, as they'd lost everything in the tower.

Ginny looked at Harry and answered his question with a shake of her head. Ron hadn't heard more than a handful of syllables out of her since the night of the attack. He knew that Harry was concerned about her, too. Hermione said she just needed time.

"Do you still have the other locket?" Moody asked. "The fake?"

"As a matter of fact," Harry said with a grin, and produced it from his pocket. He dropped it in Moody's rough palm. "I've been fiddling with it, hoping it might inspire me as to where the real one is." He pulled out the slip of parchment as well, all yellowed and creased from age and use.

Lupin picked it up. As he read it, he began to frown. "'To the Dark Lord, I know I will be dead long before you read this. But I want you to know it was I who discovered your secret. I have stolen the real Horcrux and intend to destroy it as soon as I can. I face death in the hope that when you meet your match you will be mortal once more. R.A.B.'"

"You know who it is, don't you?" Harry asked him, surprised. "R.A.B.?"

"I..." Lupin hesitated. "Perhaps." He studied the note, and Ron thought his face grew even darker. "You must understand that I never knew him well, so I wouldn't know his script, or his word choice. I can't tell for certain if he actually penned this."

"Who?" Harry asked.

"R.A.B. Regulus Black." Moody's magic eye spun in his head and stared at Lupin through his ear. "Middle name of Arcturus, I believe. After his grandfather. And a couple of distant cousins or uncles. That family tended to recycle names quite a bit."

"Regulus?" Moody asked.

"Regulus?" Harry echoed. Ron knew what was going through Harry's head. Regulus was Sirius' brother. Another connection to his godfather. "But...Regulus was a Death Eater," Harry managed to croak out.

"They killed him," Moody said with a cheek full of porridge. A little spewed from his mouth as he spoke. "Some say he turned against them at the end, and some say he just got too close – knew the wrong kinds of secrets."

"If this is indeed Regulus," Lupin said, indicating the note he held, "then it would suggest both."

"So, Sirius' brother went in to that cave by the ocean and stole Voldemort's Horcrux?" Ron asked. It seemed terribly far fetched to his mind. He recalled with all too perfect clarity the trial Harry had described to him and Hermione: the cave and its difficult-to-reach entrance, the requirement of a blood sacrifice to enter the inner chamber, the lake of the dead, and the goblet that had to be drunk in order to drain it. So much to go through for a Death Eater, even one who belatedly discovered a conscience. "Why would he go through all that and then not destroy it?"

"Maybe he did," Lupin said.

"Or maybe they got him before he could figure it out. As you now know all too well, they're not as easy to dispatch as one might think," Moody said.

"If it was destroyed, then the rod would've been the fifth little death," Harry said. And it's been longer than a fortnight. I think it's still out there somewhere."

"But where?" Ron asked. "We're not going to have to go traipsing through a creepy old cemetery and dig up Sirius' dead brother's grave, are we?"

"I doubt it would've been buried on him," Harry said.

"I doubt there would've been enough to bury," Moody retorted.

Lupin's expression got harder, and his pale complexion went a little greyer. There hadn't been enough of Tonks to bury, either. Her family had had a service for her, but that was after Lupin had taken little Jack and fled. He'd never seen the fuchsia flowers that had covered the room, or heard the kind, loving words of the people who missed her. It had been a difficult night for Ron, and it wasn't until much later that he was able to find any comfort in it.

Ron steered the subject back to the locket. "If he didn't destroy it, and it wasn't buried with him, then where would he put it? Surely he would've hidden it someplace safe. Gringotts, maybe?"

"Sirius never mentioned a locket to you?" Harry asked Lupin.

"If he had, I'm certain I wouldn't remember," Lupin responded. "He never mentioned a Horcrux or having any artifact once belonging to Slytherin, of that I'm certain."

"W-what...what would it have looked like?" Ginny asked, staring into her bowl. They all looked at her.

"Not like this, that's for sure," Moody told her. "It would've been gold, most likely. And heavy, if it had a soul in it."

"And it would've had the Slytherin crest on it," Harry said. "Hufflepuff's cup had her crest, and Ravenclaw's scepter had hers. And Gryffindor's sword has his."

"Why, Ginny?" Lupin asked, almost kindly.

"Well," she stirred her spoon slowly around the dregs in her bowl. "There was a locket...that summer we were cleaning out Headquarters. But it was black."

"Black, eh?" Moody said.

"It was heavy," Ginny said. "But I don't remember it having a family crest. We all tried to open it, but couldn't."

"I don't remember that," Ron said.

"You spent the majority of the time making tea to avoid housework," Harry reminded him. "I don't think you cleaned so much as a doxy from the curtains."

"Did so!" Ron had avoided an embarrassing amount of work.

"I don't remember it, either," Harry said and turned back to his girlfriend. She was eyeing another bowl of porridge. "What did we do with it?"

Ginny shrugged. "I think it was in the box to be tossed out."

"What?" This came from Harry, Moody and Lupin.

"Well, I can't be sure," she told them with a desperate tone in her voice. "It was a long time ago. It might not be the same locket." She looked to Harry, but he was lost in thought.

"Wasn't Kreacher rescuing Black family things?" Ron asked.

"Mundungus was poaching things from number 12, too. He might've gotten his hands on it," Harry said, agitated. Ginny looked worriedly at him.

"It might very well still be there," Lupin said slowly. "Ginny, what room was it in?"

"The parlor," she said, though she didn't take her eyes from Harry.

"If Kreacher had it, it might be in his den. In the cupboard, in the kitchen, under the water heater," Ron offered. "That's where it lived."

Harry hadn't heard this last idea, his eyes stared glassy past Ron's shoulder. "Mundungus is in Azkaban. Isn't he?" He looked at Moody,

but didn't seem to really see him. "Do you think he'd even remember a trinket he pinched years ago after being in Azkaban all this time?"

"There's only one way to find out," Moody said gruffly. He pushed his bowl aside.

Harry nodded. His cheeks were very red, as if he had a fever. Ginny touched his arm. He brushed her hand away.

"You should be in bed," she whispered violently at him. "The draught is wearing off, isn't it?"

He nodded. "Hermione will be looking for me." He tried to stand, but stumbled, and if it weren't for Ginny he would've landed face down in Hagrid's porridge.

"All right, then," Hagrid said. "Up to bed with you." He picked Harry up like a rag doll and held him up by the scruff of his t-shirt. They walked like that back his quarters, with Ron and Ginny following. Moody and Lupin also followed, but only so that Hagrid could then be escorted back down to the Great Hall. There were a few words said about the redundancy of this. Hagrid wasn't one to take their three person system seriously, but Moody certainly was.

Hermione was there in the room when they arrived. "Harry!" she admonished and then hurried to his side when she saw the state of him. Hagrid dumped him on the bed, and Hermione helped him lay comfortably. Ron saw, with some surprise, that Ginny didn't seem put-out at all by Hermione's fuss over Harry. Instead she went to the small table near the couch and poured a glass of water from the pewter pitcher there, took a deep drink while holding her middle.

"Why do you never listen?" Hermione was saying. "You know you need to take better care of yourself." She went on and on while she pulled out a small stone flask and held it up to his lips. He swallowed down the contents, coughed and gagged at the taste, and then took the offered fresh cup of water from Ginny, all while Hermione continued to nag. "This draught won't work on its own, you know," she said. "You've got to get enough rest and enough to eat. Have you

been eating?" A glance to the plate beside the bed that she'd brought him that morning told her he hadn't.

Once Hagrid, Lupin and Moody departed, Ginny, sitting next to her dozing boyfriend, turned to Hermione who was jotting things down in a bound journal on Ron's bed. "Do you," she began, and then started again a little louder. "Do you remember when we were cleaning out number 12 a couple of years ago?"

Hermione looked up and considered her. "I remember the doxies. And the bogart."

"There was a locket that someone found in the parlor. About this big," Ginny said, making a fist, "and quite heavy. Do you remember?"

Hermione looked off at nothing as she thought back. Ron felt his heart quicken a little. He loved it when she did that. But he didn't want to be caught staring again, so he went back to Dumbledore's journal. It was the only one to survive as Ron had had it in his own room when the tower came down.

"I think...didn't I try to get it open? None of the spells I knew at the time worked." Hermione nodded at Ginny. "It was an ugly old thing, wasn't it?"

"Harry thinks it's the fifth Horcrux?"

"What? No!" Hermione's fingers went to her mouth. Harry startled out of his light doze, and then settled back once Ginny touched his arm. "Is it still there?" Hermione asked. "Wasn't it thrown out? Blast it all! I don't know why Sirius was so insistent on clearing the place of his family's-"

Ginny cut her off with a glare and a hand up to stop her. Harry was still very defensive of Sirius, and she was smart to head off any tension before it had a chance to build. Though, with the heavy breath sounds once again coming from Harry, it was doubtful that he'd heard any of their conversation. Ron looked at his girlfriend's stern expression and was puzzled by how critical Hermione could be

of Sirius, who everyone knew was cooler than cool, and still have tenderness in her heart for that deranged house elf Kreacher.

"The locket might not have been thrown out," Ron told her. "Kreacher was stealing stuff from the rubbish boxes, and also remember when Harry caught Mundungus with all sorts of Black family heirlooms in Hogsmeade. He was stealing from number 12 and pawning things."

"Voldemort's Horcrux was pawned?" Hermione looked scandalized. "Well, it did have something that looked like a crest on it. Someone was likely to think it valuable, even if it wouldn't open."

"A crest?" Harry sat up in the bed. Apparently he had heard the conversation, after all. "Slytherin's crest?"

"I don't remember. Actually, I don't think I recognized it."

Harry pointed to the stack of books Hermione had at the end of her bed, and then to the book at the bottom. *Hogwarts: A History*. Ginny retrieved it for him, and he flipped rapidly through the pages.

"Did it look like this?" he asked, holding up the book.

It was Slytherin's crest: a serpent in the shape of an S, with swords crossed on either side. Hermione hesitated.

"Could have been. I don't really remember. It was a long time ago, and I wasn't really looking that hard at it. I think I'd assumed it was the Black crest, but I don't know why I thought so."

Harry produced a handkerchief from the drawer beside his bed. "This is the Black family crest." Hermione went to his beside and studied the embroidery. She glanced from it to the image in the book.

"Why do you have a Black handkerchief?" Ron asked.

"Sirius gave it to me."

Well, that should've been obvious, Ron thought. It looked as if it had never been used. The few things his godfather gave him were prized possessions to Harry.

"It was this," Hermione said pointing to the book. "Or at least more this than that." More the Slytherin crest than the Black.

"You're sure?" Harry asked, his voice low and controlled. Ron could tell he was getting excited again and trying not to worry Ginny.

"No, of course I'm not sure!" Hermione snapped. "It was years ago!"

"We need to talk to Mundungus," Harry said.

"Well, not right now," Hermione told him. "Lay back and let that potion I made for you work."

"But-"

She looked sternly at him. "Harry, honestly, even if we knew where the Horcrux was, you're in no shape to dispatch it, let alone fight whatever it is that will follow two weeks after. Now lay back and nap. Let us do some of the work for you."

He turned to Ginny for help, but she was looking through the discarded *Hogwarts: A History*. With a huff of frustration he flopped backwards on to the pillow.

"Thank you," Hermione said, self-satisfied, and she went back to the other bed, and to her journal.

Ron glanced down at Dumbledore's writing again. Emma Thistleblow. She was a Muggle-born. Ron had read and re-read the five written pages where Dumbledore described her and her many wonderful attributes. She was lovely and smart – brilliant was the word he had used over and over. She was inquisitive and kind to those she felt needed some kindness in their lives. Ron looked up at his girlfriend, bent over her book, quill scratching away. Hermione was all of those things. Was it possible that Dumbledore once fancied a girl like Hermione? Was he ever eighteen? It was so hard to imagine a

Dumbledore without a long, white beard, without spectacles and wrinkles and wisdom garnered from a century of life.

Dumbledore had lost his love, though. And Ron knew that had he and Hermione not been Fated, he would've lost her, too.

"Oh, my stars!" Ginny sat up straight. "Oh, my bloody stars!" She scrambled to Harry's closet and pulled her jeans off the door hook. From the pocket she pulled out a folded piece of parchment. Ron recognized it as the second prophecy.

"What is it?" Harry asked.

She ignored him. "Hermione, do you still have...of course you do. What were the words that the runes translated to? The runes on the scepter?"

Hermione stared at her for a moment, studied her face, and seemed troubled by what she saw. Then she flipped to the back of her journal and pulled out a parchment of her own. "What are you thinking, Ginny?"

"Tell me what the runes say once the code is broken."

Hermione read, "'Ultimate, Doom, Prophecy."

"No, the last one. The one you didn't think was likely. The most ancient translation."

"Uh...Prophecy, Secret, Forgiveness. But you're right, it is unlikely because..." She lost her train of thought as Ginny thrust her scrap of parchment in front of her and grabbed Hermione's quill from her hand.

"Here," Ginny said, and scribbled on the parchment. "If you capitalize Secret and Forgiven... Do you see? This prophecy came out of the scepter with the words Prophecy, Secret, and Forgiveness on it! Can you see it?"

"I...do..." Hermione said. "But...wait. This rune 'Forgiveness' is a noun, as in a person or thing that represents forgiveness. So, I suppose you could look at it as...Forgiven. The Forgiven."

"What are you on about?" Harry asked impatiently.

"But what does that mean?" Ginny asked her. "Even if we decided that Ravenclaw purposely had those particular runes carved on her scepter for a reason, and we're certain that 'Forgiven' and 'Secret' should be capitalized, how does that help us?"

Hermione read from the prophecy: "'The Dark One will end with an evil death, only if the Chosen can keep his Forgiven Secret.'" She slumped a little, as did Ginny next to her. "You're right. We've already decided that Ron's the Secret."

Ron knew, though. He understood, and it sent a chill right through the center of him. He knew and they didn't. "I'm the Secret," he said to Hermione. "But you're the Forgiven." She just stared at him, as did Ginny and Harry. "You cast an Unforgivable, and were...forgiven. We are together the Forgiven Secret. We know the Fates meant us to be together. They see us as one." Tears rose in her eyes, but didn't fall. A lump formed in Ron's throat.

It was difficult to accept that they were Fated; that the Fates had singled them out, even with physical proof. It was even harder to know that the Fates had spoken of them as one in prophecy form. Yes, Harry in a prophecy was one thing – he was Harry Potter, after all. But Ron? Well, he wasn't anyone special. It just all seemed so terribly wrong. And yet, he knew with everything in him that it wasn't. He was the Secret and she was the Forgiven.

Hermione looked back down at the parchment. "'The Dark One will end with an evil death, only if the Chosen can keep his Forgiven Secret, only if the Chosen can protect his heart-'" She gasped and looked to Ginny. "You're the Heart!"

"No, she's not!" Harry insisted. They all turned to stare at him now, surprised by his vehemence. "She can't be! She's not!"

"Harry?" Hermione said. "We know how you feel about Ginny-"

"It says that the heart will be broken. She's not the Heart with a capital H. It's not Ginny!"

"Harry," Ginny said, quietly and calmly.

"NO!"

Hermione skipped down and read: "'For some Hearts will surely be broken, and some deeds cannot be Forgiven, and some Secrets are meant to be told.'"

The words seemed heavier now, more ominous, even though Ron wasn't entirely sure what they meant. "Doesn't sound good for any of us, does it?" he quipped, though not as lightly as he'd intended.

While Harry rested, everyone else calling Hogwarts home had work to do. Wizards and witches came and went at all hours of the day and night, filtered through several layers of security both at the main gate and at the entrance of the castle proper. Ron worked closely with Moody exploring strategy options with their available fire power. It became clear to Ron early on that this wasn't just a war between Harry and Voldemort, or even the Order and the Death Eaters. The entire wizarding world was fighting good against bad, light against dark. And it was difficult for Ron to remember that not all good could be relied on to help, and that not all dark was their enemy.

The merepeople and centaurs that lived on Hogwarts grounds were technically considered good creatures, as they weren't dark, but neither of them trusted wizards or man enough to be drawn to one side or the other. Both, however, had made it clear that should they go under attack – as the centaurs had the year before – they would respond with all due force. Ron rather thought that both would've joined their ranks had Dumbledore still been alive. The old wizard had a way of befriending even the most neutral of peoples.

Between meetings with Moody and the continued lessons with McGonagall, Ron's days were full and exhausting. He saw his mother

at supper usually, which was pleasant enough, and got to play with Jack for a few minutes before he went down in the evenings.

Jackie was three months old now. Tonks had been dead for ten weeks. Ron hated that he was keeping track. Lupin still cried for her when he thought no one was paying attention. Ron worried for him. But not as much as he worried for Ginny.

With Harry, Ginny seemed almost her old self, though withdrawn, and maybe a little tired. Without Harry she was a person Ron had never met - angry and critical and cynical – when she talked at all. She avoided other people, particularly their mum. She had nightmares and often woke several times a night screaming so loud and rough that her voice was scratchy in the morning. But Ginny didn't cry. And she didn't smile anymore.

Hermione and Ron had been discussing just this on their way back from their nightly toilet when Sir Nick floated by. "Good evening to the both of you!" he said amiably as he turned and began to float backwards in front of them to keep up with their stride. "I trust you're finding Ravenclaw Tower quite comfortable."

"Hello, Sir Nick. It's fine," Hermione said. Ron greeted him with a "Hiya."

"Good, good," he said, and glanced over his shoulder before asking, "Can I trouble you for a moment of your time? My fellow ghosts and I are terribly upset by recent events, as I'm sure you are as well, and we can't help but think that the...infiltration...was far from an isolated incident. The Grey Lady has gone so far as to say it's a small taste of what is to come, and this has us...well, nervous. We see the preparations that are taking place in the castle. Well, in what is left of the castle, I should say. We want to help."

"You do?" Hermione asked. "Because you should probably know that we do anticipate another attack here, quite possibly the last attack."

"Last?" Sir Nick asked in a squeaky voice. "Yes, well...we – the other ghosts and I - are spirits bound to a place, and to be bound to rubble, well, it's exceedingly unpleasant, as one might imagine. Many of us

worry, though, that it could be worse still if Hogwarts were to go the way of the Shrieking Shack. All those souls...lost forever."

"But..." Hermione said, confused. "They were already dead."

"Dead, yes," Sir Nick said somewhat defensively. "But there is a difference between death and oblivion."

"Sir Nick," Ron said, cutting in. "What about the portraits? Can we count on their help as well?" He was thinking of a communication system that would stretch out beyond Hogwarts to anywhere there were companion portraits. They'd have to distinguish the Dark from the rest, but he thought that could be done. Having the Hogwarts ghosts and portraits on their side could prove advantageous.

"I shall consult Sir Cadogan," Sir Nick said. He floated away and Ron's mind continued to work on the new possibilities. Most of their current Death Eater intelligence came by word of mouth from Order members. Trouble was, many of the Order members had been successfully identified – they were difficult to miss, actually. Anyone who was ever friendly with Dumbledore was suspect. So, gathering information was a difficult and dangerous process. Now, potentially any portrait in the school might link to one where conversations could be overheard without danger to anyone. Sinister plots might be witness, and then reported an instant later. They might actually know what was going on out there as it was happening!

"Don't you think we should've talked this over with Harry first?" Hermione asked.

Ron wasn't worried. He was certain Harry would appreciate the beauty in having an information network, and the ghosts would add extra security, especially when time ran close. He should tell Moody right away, though.

"You can make it back to the room, can't you?" he asked, already turning to take the corridor to the Professor's Corridor.

"Ron? Where are you going? We're supposed to stay together! It was your stupid rule, you know! And we're already a person down! Ron!"

"I'll be quick," he assured her, and broke into a jog.

How many ghosts were in the castle, anyway? Dozens probably. Ron only knew the names of the four House Ghosts and Professor Binns, who, when last someone had checked, was still teaching History of Magic to an empty classroom.

Down two corridors, and one set of stairs, through the vestibule and onto the professor's floor. Ron knocked. There was no response, which struck Ron as odd. Moody could be out on patrol, he supposed, or checking with new arrivals, or a hundred other things. There wasn't any reason for the uneasy sensation in the base of Ron's belly. And yet...there it was. Something was happening. He needed to find Moody. And maybe Hermione. He never should've left her on her own.

Ron rushed down hall after hall, the portraits whispering as he passed. He tried to tell himself that Hermione was fine – she'd had her wand, after all, and with all the Order in the castle, plus the multiple checkpoints, it was virtually impossible that someone should get in undetected. Surely Moody was just having a bite in the Great Hall. Or an extra leisurely bath. The more he tried to convince himself he was over-reacting, the more Ron knew something was not right. By the time he reached his corridor he was sprinting, and he didn't slow down until he was through the door.

Harry was still in bed, though sitting up and participating avidly in a conversation between Hermione, McGonagall, Moody and...Neville?

"Oi!" Ron said skidding to a stop. "Longbottom! I didn't expect – what the bloody hell are you doing here? There a war on!"

"Language, Mr. Weasley," McGonagall corrected.

"What's happened?" Moody demanded, still twitching from Ron's abrupt entrance. He did lower his wand, though.

"Neville's come to help us," Harry said energetically.

"You don't say!" Ron returned.

"We've yet to make a decision on that," Moody insisted. "I'm for packing the lad off! Too many children involved with this already!"

"And I agree," McGonagall seconded. "Mr. Longbottom, certainly your place is with your grandmother at times like this."

"My gran said I haven't got to come home until You-Know-Who is good and dealt with. She said my parents wouldn't do any less, and any son of theirs would do the same."

McGonagall looked appalled. Moody snorted his disgust. "Funny how we don't see your gran here, now do we? Ready to deal with You-Know-Who on her own?"

Neville just shrugged and looked a little lost. "Well, she is quite old."

"Welcome aboard, mate," Ron said. "Make yourself at home – although," he glanced around the room. It was already far too small for four people, especially when one of them wanted to be intimate with his girlfriend. "Just not here, right? Maybe Professor McGonagall can find you a room?" He looked expectantly at her, as did they all.

"Oh, all right," she conceded, though not gracefully. Her voice went a little shrill. "But I would like it to be known that I disapprove. Neville, regardless of your grandmother's obvious blindness to you, you would be far better off with as much distance between you and Hogwarts as you can get."

"All things being equal, Professor," Neville said earnestly, "I think I can be useful here. Like Hermione said, I'm good with plants and herbs. I can help her with her potions and Healing Salves. I'd like to be...useful."

"Yes, well." McGonagall touched his shoulder tenderly. "Come with me. We'll see if we can find you a bed. "Mr. Weasley, do not think that I didn't notice you arriving in such haste alone. If you are to take a leadership position and assist in the creation of rules for others to

follow, we expect that you will be setting an example." And with that, she left with Neville on her heels.

Moody followed, but grumbled under his breath: "They've got infiri, vampires, werewolves, and an army of evil wizards. What have we got? Teenagers!"

Ron decided he'd wait until morning to tell him about the ghosts and portraits.

Number 12 was dark and damp, and it felt once more as if the walls were crawling. They'd only been gone a couple of months and already they had a doxy infestation and something large was knocking around inside the grandfather clock in the entry. Ron worried it was a boggart. Once Moody determined the coast was clear, Ron and Hermione headed to the parlor, Moody and Shacklebolt went down to the kitchens, and Ron's mum with Neville and Ginny headed upstairs – all searching for a locket that might be black or gold, but was certainly heavy and held a piece of Voldemort's soul.

"I think there used to be a cabinet over there," Hermione pointed to a cabinet-less space in one corner of the room. "I think I remember cleaning it out."

"Well, we can't very well search what isn't there any longer, can we?" Ron said. Hermione immediately went to the books shelves and rummaged among them. He would never understand her. "You think one of us stuck an old, un-openable locket among the books, do you?"

She rolled her eyes and sighed with exasperation. "Ron, please. I just want to be sure we've checked everywhere."

In truth, there weren't many places to put a heavy piece of jewelry in the parlor any longer. Since Harry had had the archimagitect in, the house's furnishings had been pared down to the minimum for comfort and style. Countless curios, old chairs, and dusty knick-knacks had been removed from the manse without Ron ever missing them. Which led the mind to wonder...

"The archimagitect," Ron said. "What do we know about him?"

Hermione turned and looked at him. "The archimagitect?"

"He had access to this whole place. He took it apart and put it back together again in a different order. He touched everything, didn't he? Wouldn't have been hard for him to 'move' something away, now would it?" Ron could see the concern cloud Hermione's face.

"I'm sure Harry had him cleared or something, before he hired him," Hermione said, though she didn't sound sure at all.

"Cleared by whom? The Ministry? The Order?"

"Moody, I'd assume," she said. Her brows rose and fell as she spoke, a sure sign she was worried, too. "Ron, you don't think he'd be so careless, do you? I mean, this is the Order Headquarters. He must've at the very least..." She didn't finish that thought. Her eyes locked with his, and in that moment they exchanged more than glances. Ron's heart began to race, his mouth went dry. He witnessed the instant she knew what he knew, believed what he believed, and it was thrilling. He couldn't help but smile. She couldn't help but return it.

Which made Moody's abrupt entrance all the more infuriating. He came in with Shacklebolt. "Found nothing," he said gruffly. He stopped abruptly when he saw Ron and Hermione.

Shacklebolt bumped into him with a mumbled, "Sorry mate." The healers at St. Mungo's had done as much as they could for the scar that ran jaggedly across Shacklebolt's face. But much of the left side of his mouth remained paralyzed in a droopy fashion that affected his speech.

Moody didn't give him a chance to talk. He stepped forward and demanded: "What're you two doing, standing there, smiling at each other like that?" His magic eye sized them both up, then disappeared into his head, presumably to make sure everything was all right upstairs.

Ron and Hermione exchanged innocent looks.

"What's happened?" Moody demanded again. "Did you find it?"

"It's not here," Hermione said bluntly.

Moody's magic eye refocused on her. He took a couple of limped steps toward her. His eye was telling him something. "You're going to tell me you know where it is?"

"No," she told him. "We don't know. But we think Harry might."

"Only he doesn't know it," Ron added.

Moody's eye spun around to Ron a fraction of a second before the rest of his head did. "What do you know, pimple?"

Ron shook his head. "It's what Harry knows that's the key."

"It's Mundungus, I tell you!" Harry insisted from his angry perch on the bed. His legs were crossed tightly, as were his arms across his chest. "Someone needs to talk to Mundungus! We're wasting time with this rubbish!"

"But," Hermione said stepping forward. Ron touched her arm. It was useless to fight Harry when he was like this. She knew it just as well as he. Harry had been left to convalesce physically, but mentally he'd been doing acrobatics in that bed for the last few weeks. He was beyond stir-crazy, and his patience was thread-bare.

Hermione gave Ron a stern look. It was difficult for her to let anything go, especially if she believed she was right. She conceded, though, however reluctantly, and stepped back beside Ron.

"Talking to Mundungus isn't as simple as you seem to think," Moody snapped at Harry. "It's not a tea party, Harry. The man's in Azkaban."

"Without the dementors," Harry reminded them all. "The ministry's in charge of the prison again."

"You still can't very well walk in the front door!" Moody insisted.

Harry's eyes narrowed. "No, you're right." He threw back the covers and swung his legs over the side of the bed.

"Now, Harry!" Hermione began.

"What the bloody hell do you think you're doing?" Moody challenged him.

"What I should've done ages ago," Harry told him. He tested his legs, and then stood, and he seemed as surprised as anyone that he didn't collapse. "Now, if you would," he said and pointed at the door. "I need to dress."

"Now wait one bloody minute!" Moody demanded. "We need you whole-

"No," Harry told him. "You need me to defeat Voldemort. And in order to do that, we need this Horcrux. Mundungus has it. And I'm going to get it." His voice was low and controlled, and Ron recognized it from that afternoon he and Harry had gone to the Ministry together. Never in a million years would Ron even think to speak to Moody that way. Never would he dare. But Moody didn't hex Harry, didn't even argue further. He glared a little, and his eye refocused on Harry. Then he shook his head and limped out the door. Most everyone else followed.

"Ron," Harry said to stop him. When the door closed it was just Harry and Ginny, and Ron. Ginny hadn't budged from her seat on the bed, one leg tucked under her and the other draped over the side of the mattress. "It's not that I don't believe what you said. You made a good point about the archimagitect. But it's Mundungus. I'm sure of it."

"What makes you so sure?" Ron asked.

"Because I saw him, Ron. I saw him with Sirius' stuff."

Ron shrugged. "It could be Mundungus, I suppose. Or you could be irrational the way you always are when Sirius is concerned. Either way, it's your call, mate. I'm with you."

"That's..." Harry inhaled deeply. "Thanks. I knew you would be, but I needed to hear you say it." He went to his trunk for clothes, and Ginny got up to help him. Ron decided it was time to leave.

Before he closed the door behind him he heard Ginny ask, "Uh...Harry. You did check out the archimagitect, though, didn't you? Through the Order or the Ministry or something? Right? You checked references?"

"I...uh..." Harry's hesitation made Ron look up, and Harry's gaze met his for the briefest moment. "I'm not sure," Harry said. "I think so."

What he didn't say was that, at the time, he'd been so deep in Hermione that he might've checked out the archimagitect and not even remembered. Or he might've blown bubbles out his ass.

"So, what's the plan?" Ron asked as they passed the magic windows in the Ministry corridor. Today they showed a calm pastoral scene with fluffy white clouds and flocks of birds flying in V formations.

"Just follow my lead," Harry said. He was walking slowly, but with determination. "I might need some energy. If we're here too long. I'll signal you."

This worried Ron, and he studied his friend's profile. It had been nearly six weeks since they'd destroyed the scepter Horcrux, and Harry still looked sickly. It was amazing that he'd been able to stay on his broom as far as the Main Gate, and then Apparate on his own to London. Hell, Ron was amazed that he was still upright.

"I don't think that's such a good idea," Ron said finally. They both knew it, of course. The more Ron fed him in this condition the weaker Harry would grow, and the longer it would take him to recover his own strength. And, at the rate he was currently going, Ron rather thought it could take years. They didn't have a years.

"Just follow my lead."

The Minister refused to see them, of course. Harry went in, anyway, and left the Undersecretary balking at his nerve. The Minister stood and glowered at Harry's entrance. He didn't seem to notice Ron at all.

"Why do you bother to announce yourself if you're going to force your way in anyway?" Scrimgeour asked.

"Why do you bother to deny me an audience when you know I'm going to force my way in?" Harry countered. "But I haven't come to discuss manners and civility."

"Merlin's beard!" The Minister said, taking in Harry's appearance for the first time. "So, the rumors are true. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has attacked you!"

"Repeatedly," Harry told him. "But this was not him – or at least not him directly."

"But you look like death warmed over!"

"A necessary casualty, I'm afraid," Harry quipped with a lightness that betrayed the dark underneath. "Fortunately my girlfriend doesn't seem to mind."

"Yes, well," the Minister said, and trying not to stare. To Ron's surprise, Harry took the un-offered leather arm chair opposite the Minister's heavy desk. Scrimgeour's smile was like that of a lion showing his teeth. "So, what do you want, then?"

"I'm in need of something. Of a missing key to defeating Voldemort." At the Minister's shudder Harry turned to the Undersecretary who'd followed them in, a ferret-like man with a weak chin and fur-like hair. "You'll understand when I say that what I have to say to the Minister must stay between the Minister and myself. And my Smisurato," Harry added, when the little man looked to Ron. Harry indicated Ron with a jab of his chin. "And that secret is still safe, I trust."

"Of course," the Minister assured somewhat defensively. He waved to his assistant, who then scurried from the room. "Now what is it?"

Harry took his time, made sure he had the Minister's full attention. "Mundungus Fletcher. He's in Azkaban."

"Now why do I know that name?" the Minister asked, sitting back in his chair and tapping his finger tips together over his broad chest. "Fletcher, you said?"

"He was caught pretending to be an Inferius at a crime scene. He's a petty thief, actually. And not a very good one."

"Another Stan Shunpike, is it? Well, I'll say to you now as I have in the past: I do not release Azkaban Prisoners because someone asks me to!"

"I'm the Chosen One," Harry corrected him. "Not just someone. And I don't want him released. I just need to speak to him. Here. Now."

The Minister's bushy brows rose. "You can't honestly believe that I would bring an Azkaban prisoner here."

"And now," Harry said confidently. "We're in a bit of a rush."

The look of shock on the Minister's face melted into mirth and he let loose with a huge, rumbling belly laugh as he dropped into his chair. "You had me going for a minute, there, Potter!" he said, wagging his finger at Harry. "You're one cocky redcap, I tell you!"

"Either I talk to Mundungus now or Voldemort will be able to get the key to his vulnerability before I do, and all will be lost. Assuming, of course, that he hasn't already sent his Death Eaters in to get Mundungus."

"In to Azkaban?" the Minister scoffed. "Don't be insulting! I've got three dozen Aurors guarding the place-"

"Lucius Malfoy played heavily in the attack on Hogwarts a week or two back," Harry said flatly. "And as I understand it, he was one of

Azkaban's more famous inmates. If they can get out, sir, I can assure you they can get it. Our biggest and best hope right now is that Mundungus has what we need, and luckily, thus far, he's managed to remain over-looked by Voldemort."

"Please!" The Minister said with a wince. "Not that name. Not here."

"Very well," Harry told him. "I trust that you now understand the importance and sensitivity of the situation. We should have the meeting here, in your office..." The Minister began to protest, but Harry talked over him. "...as it's the most heavily defended and un-snoopable room in Britain."

"You honestly think I'm going to do this?" asked the Minister. "You're mad."

"Just enough to make me the right man for the job," Harry agreed. He leaned heavily on one arm of the chair and deliberately tapped his ear three times. The Minister didn't seem to have noticed, but Ron did. Was this the signal? One might reason that if there was going to be a signal then one might discuss what that signal was supposed to be ahead of time. Especially when the signal was about a very bad idea.

Harry and the Minister went another couple of rounds, but Ron hardly heard them. He was concentrating on bringing his cold up from the depths of his well and reaching out for Harry. He found him and was shocked at how very little there was in his well. It was dangerous, what Harry wanted him to do. Risky. And Ron didn't understand the point. Mundungus didn't have the Horcrux, and Ron was certain the wizard didn't know where it was.

Perspiration broke out around Harry's ear and a drop slowly began its downward track. He was counting on Ron to back him in front of the Minister. And Ron had given his word that he would. Of course he would. Slowly Ron allowed his magic to pool around Harry's, and then he felt Harry tug at him. Ron willingly gave whatever Harry took.

Harry sat up straighter in the chair. He managed a stiff smile. "I'm glad we could come to an agreement, then, sir," he said to the Minister. "We'll wait here for Mr. Fletcher while you make the

arrangements. And, if you don't mind, Minister...a chair for my Smisurato?"

"Of course," the Minister said through clenched teeth. Then he stormed out of his own office.

Harry took a deep breath and smiled wanly at Ron. "Thanks, mate. That was a life saver."

Ron nodded, but he wasn't so sure.

It took an hour for them to bring Mundungus in, and Ron was shocked by what he saw. The old man's blood-shot, baggy eyes were crusted with grime and filth, and his once stringy, ginger hair was now a muddled grey streaked with a year's worth of dirt and grease. He was what squat men become when they're underfed and under exercised: gaunt the way starved cows become. His sad, dirty face was covered by a beard so thick and matted it hardly looked like hair anymore. Ron wasn't certain he understood where he was. The wizard looked dazed.

When he saw Harry, Mundungus dropped to his knees on the floor. That's when the stench hit Ron.

"Help," was all Mundungus was able to get out. It was quite possible it was the first word he'd uttered in a year.

"You stole things from the Black Family Mansion, Mundungus."

"No," said the man groveling on the floor. "I wouldn't. Not me. Help. Please."

"I know you did," Harry insisted. Ron didn't know how he was able to stand there, looking down on the pathetic wizard at his feet. Ron had to look away. "I don't care anymore. I just need to know what happened to the things you took."

Mundungus shook his head. Ron could see the lice crawling across his scalp. "It's gone. All gone."

"Did you sell it?" Harry demanded. "Pawn it?"

"I don't...I don't...help." The man broke down into shallow sobs.

"There was a locket. A large, heavy, black locket. What happened to it?"

"I don't," Mundungus said between gasps. "I don't..."

Harry dropped to one knee and grabbed Mundungus by the beard, forced his face up, forced the man to look at him. "Did you ever find a large, black locket?"

"It wouldn't open," Mundungus whispered.

"Where is it?"

"Kreacher. That wretched house elf."

"Kreacher doesn't have it," Harry said, his voice getting very dangerous. Ron felt him pulling more energy.

"It wouldn't open," Mundungus repeated. "Worthless. Ugly. I let the beast have it. I took the candlesticks instead."

Harry dropped him, and he fell to the floor. The man began to sob again. The Minister looked horror-struck by what he'd just witnessed, and the state of the man on his carpet. And the smell.

"How many more years to his sentence?" Harry asked him. His hand was black where he'd touched the prisoner.

"I...uh..." It took a moment, and a throat clearing for the Minister to recall. "Two."

"Reduce it," Harry told him. "To time already served. He's a petty thief. He doesn't deserve this."

The Minister shook his head.

"You will," Harry said. "Not because it's politically advantageous or because people will hail you merciful and wise. You will do it because it's the right thing to do."

"I can't..." the Minister said. He couldn't seem to look up from the weeping creature on his floor.

"I rather think you can do anything you put your mind to," Harry told him. "You are the Minister, after all. You just have to do it."

Two guards came in then, and hauled the limp, crying form that was once Mundungus out of the office. There was a large smudge on the carpet where he'd been. Ron followed Harry out. He couldn't look at his friend, and neither of them spoke until they got back to Hogwarts. And even then, neither said a word to each other.

"You didn't see him. He was scary," Ron said the next morning in the third floor girl's washroom. No one used it because it was fairly close to where Gryffindor Tower had once been and still smelled strongly of smoke. This made it an ideal place for Ron and Hermione to be alone. Ginny and Harry were back in the room being alone as well.

"He's Harry," Hermione said with exasperation. "How scary could he possibly have been? And you said he freed Mundungus."

"I said he tried. Who knows what the Minister will do?"

He watched as she pulled her hair back and began to scrub at her face. Her morning ritual was an odd one. Wash this bit, soak this bit, scrub this bit, but not this bit over here. It was all skin as far as Ron could see. He looked down the rest of her skin as well. After they'd made love she'd quickly showered and then dressed in her knickers. The rest was in plain sight for him to enjoy.

"And anyway, it shouldn't matter if he's scary or not. You knew what might happen if you gave him energy. He can barely walk now. Ginny acted his crutch this morning." She had a way of nagging him and rubbing soap on her face while standing mostly naked that made him feel all warm and tingly. "Ron, honestly!"

He looked up to see that she'd discovered his roaming eyes. "What? You're standing there like that and I'm not supposed to look?"

She sighed.

"Anyway," Ron said, "I think you missed the point of the story. Mundungus said he never took the locket, but he remembered it."

"Yes," she said with an exaggerated sigh. "He said Kreacher had it, but Kreacher most certainly didn't have it. It wasn't in the manse-"

"Because," Ron said feeling the excitement within him grow. He knew what was going to come next and he couldn't wait to see the expression on her face as she came to realize what he'd worked out. He couldn't wait for that moment shared between them when she came to think what he was thinking. He felt giddy at the thought.

"Because the archimagitect found it!" he continued at last. "He was rearranging things, and that included the cupboard in the kitchen where Kreacher lives. He found it and took it!"

She did look at him, but the light didn't come on as it had before. The anticipation inside him fizzled.

"But why?" she asked. "I mean, yes, I can see how it's possible, and initially I thought it was probable. But it did make more sense for Mundungus to have stolen it. If you stop and think about it."

"But Mundungus didn't steal it. He took the candlesticks instead."

"The silver ones?"

"Forget the candlesticks. It's the archimagitect. We need to find him."

"Oh, all right. Do we know his name even?"

"Harry does," Ron told her.

"So why aren't you having this conversation with Harry?" Hermione asked. And in the moment after she asked the question something

struck her and she turned and looked at Ron. "Tell me why you aren't having this conversation with Harry, Ron."

He sheepishly looked down at her calves and the thick, ropey scar that stretched across the left one. "You know. He'd want to go. And you know he won't do. It's got to be you and me. And Ginny. And maybe Neville."

"Neville?"

"To even out the numbers."

"Not Moody?"

"Fine, Moody, then. Whatever! But we need to get the information out of him without cluing him in on what we're going to do with it. I need you to talk to Ginny. Convince her that this is how we protect Harry."

"You can't expect she'll lie to him. I mean, I wouldn't lie to you." She rinsed her face, studied her reflection in the mirror, and then her reflection looked at Ron. "But you're right. Harry's out of this for a while. I'll see what I can do."

Neville Longbottom had yet to make his oath to the Order, so officially he wasn't accompanying Ron, Hermione and Ginny to Hogsmeade. Although, technically Ron, Hermione and Ginny weren't officially on Order business, either, as Harry and Moody knew nothing of their plan. Neither did anyone else.

"This feels wrong," Ginny said under her breath for the hundredth time.

She wasn't just talking about the deserted streets of the wizarding town on a beautiful late spring evening, where there should've been a hundred bodies milling about, enjoying the warm air and cool breeze, the fluffy pink sunset clouds and the fading pale blue sky; and where there should've been busy little shops, but instead half of them had been burned to the ground, or else disappeared all together. Curtains slid closed as they passed. Shutters slammed shut. "This feels wrong," Ginny said again. Ron knew she wasn't talking about the

silence in the air that even the birds didn't puncture. She was talking about Harry's absence.

Hermione put a hand on her shoulder. "All right, let's remember the plan. We go in, find out if he's got the locket, get the locket and leave. We don't destroy it under any circumstances, even if we could, which I doubt." Her brows played as she spoke, and Ron knew she was nervous.

"Because destroying the locket would start the fortnight timetable?" Neville asked. "I still don't quite understand that. Where did the new prophecy come from?"

"Same place as the last two," Hermione told him. "Trelawney."

"Professor Trelawney?" Neville echoed. "Merlin's beard! But she's dead!"

"We saw her die," Ron told him. "She died giving the prophecy."

"Oh," Neville said.

They continued to walk down the deserted street. A light wind rustled Ron's hair and sent a chill down his spine. It did feel wrong, Ron decided. Honeydukes Sweetshop was closed and dark, and no sugary smell wafted out as they passed by. The Three Broomsticks was burned out, just as Weasley's Wizard Wheezes has been. Gladrags was gone, too, or at least Ron thought it had been Gladrags. Not even a sign remained in the empty lot beside the Golden Box, where Ron had bought the luck charm for Hermione's birthday so many months ago.

Ginny stopped them under the Gold Box sign and pointed to the second story window that jutted out from the face of the building like an afterthought. The small sign read in green and white lettering, "Rourke O'Rourke, Archimagitect and Notary."

"This is the place?" Ron asked. Ginny nodded. Hermione tried the door. It was locked, of course. And the drapes had been tightly drawn.

"Think anyone's home?" Neville asked. "I don't see any way up to Rourke O'Rourke except through the store. Do you?" Ginny shook her head.

"Well, either they're not here, or they are," Hermione decided, and she pulled out her wand and cast a Knocking Charm at the door, and when that didn't work she cast it on the window above.

When Ron looked back down at the door again, the old hag was staring at him with her milky, sightless eyes. He gave a little startled cry that later he knew he would deny.

"What d'ya want?" the woman asked, toothless, and creaking.

"We need to speak to Rourke O'Rourke," Hermione said loudly and clearly. "The archimagitect upstairs."

"Aye, well, 'e's not 'ere! Go 'way!" And she disappeared behind the drapes.

Hermione huffed her frustration, and started to Knock on the door again, this time with vigor. Ginny rolled her eyes and pulled out her own wand and cast: "Alohomora!" The door flew open and banged on the small table behind it. There was a small crashing sound as whatever was on the table fell to the floor.

As they walked in, the old woman screamed, and a man in his forties came thundering down the stairs. He was dressed in trousers and a collared shirt, but both were shabby from wear and washing. His blond hair was about as long as Ron's, but wavy, and the curled ends bounced as he came to a halt, wand drawn.

"You're not Death Eaters!" he yelled. "You're just common thieves!"

"There's nothing common about us," Ginny assured him.

Her calm worried Ron. "We're not thieves," Ron insisted. "Are you Rourke O'Rourke? The archimagitect? We need to talk to you."

The man's light colored eyes narrowed behind thick-framed glasses. "About what?"

"You did some work for Harry Potter," Hermione said.

He jutted his chin in the air. "I don't talk about my clients – no matter how famous they are. You're groupies, then?"

"We're part of his army," Neville said, and Rourke burst out with a snort of amusement.

"You?" he said. His wand hand lowered. Apparently he no longer considered them a threat. "Get out."

"You know Harry's the Chosen One," Ginny said in voice much the same Ron had heard come out of Harry when speaking to difficult adults like the Minister of Magic. "You know he's the One to defeat Voldemort."

The hag shrieked, and Rourke raised his wand again, pointed it at Ginny's head. "How d-d-dare you!" Rourke stammered. "How dare you sat that name!"

Ginny took a step toward his outstretched arm, and Ron wasn't fast enough to stop her. "You took something from Harry's place. You took a locket."

Rourke narrowed his eyes at her, pursed his lips. "Who are you?"

"You took the locket, and we need it back."

"I took nothing!" he insisted.

"The locket's incredibly important," Hermione told him. "No matter what price you think you can get for it, it's worth more than that. Harry needs it to defeat Voldemort. It's the only way to stop him!"

Rourke's wand whipped to Hermione now, and Ron stepped in front of her. "Easy now."

"You keep saying that name!" Rourke yelled. "Who the bloody hell are you?"

"We need the locket," Ginny said again. "You will give it back to us."

"I don't have any locket!" Rourke insisted. "Now get out!"

"It's a weapon," Hermione told him, stepping out from behind Ron. "It's not something you can just sell. And it's ugly. No one will buy it."

Fury lit Rourke's eyes. "You think so, little girl? You think the Slytherin crest isn't worth a fortune?" A tinge of excitement flirted through Ron's chest. Rourke did have the locket!

"But it's just money," Neville said.

"Spoken by someone who's never had to worry about eating a day in his life," Rourke snapped. "You have no idea what it's like! For what I can get for that piece of junk my mother will never have to worry where her next meal is coming from! I'll never have to worry about getting another client again!"

"But-but it's just money!" Hermione insisted. "You're an archimagitect! Surely you don't have to worry for money like that!"

"Really?" Rourke said with a mocking expression. "And how many new magical buildings do you think get built every year? Every ten years? Every century? The Pure Bloods are the only ones with enough money to build new, and what do they do? They live in their run-down, old family homes generation after generation after generation! The last great commission was Gringotts – and that was five hundred years ago! Do you have any idea what it's like to have a useless talent? To be good at one thing, and one thing only, and have no one want it? Want you?"

"Yes," said Neville. "It's awful." Ron glanced at him – Neville was serious.

"That ugly locket, as you so blithely put it, will insure food on my table and clothes on my back. It will take care of my mother better than my

profession ever could!" Rourke leveled his wand at Ginny once more. "I'm not giving it to anyone. Now, I won't say this again. Get out!"

Ginny raised her empty hand and held out her palm to him. "Give us the locket," she ordered.

The situation just got dangerous, Ron realized. Rourke was a man with nothing left to lose, and Ginny either didn't see this, or didn't care. She was taunting him. He needed to get her out of there.

Before he had a chance to do anything, though, the wall behind him blew in. Hermione crashed forward into Ron's back, and Ron, then, in turn, fell against Neville. The explosion and subsequent blow shocked Ron for a moment or two, and when he was able to move again he twisted his head up and peered through the dust in the air. Five black-robed Death Eaters were walking over the debris, the one in the lead, with his silvery white hair trailing below the back of his hood, pointed a long, black wand down at Rourke, now on the floor.

"You know what I'm here for," Lucius said almost genially. "Let's not make this any more painful for you than it really needs to be.

The hag coughed somewhere to Ron's left, and he saw her wrinkled, boney hand push a large chunk of plaster away. "I have it," she croaked out. "My son gave it to me to sell. I have it! Don't hurt him!"

"Then you will, no doubt, give it to me," Lucius said with a cruel smile.

"It's...it's around my neck," the hag told him. Her voice was wobbly and weak.

"Mother!" Rourke screamed, and in the next moment the old woman screamed as well.

Malfoy flicked his wand at her, and the locket soared into his hand, large and black and solid. Ron heard the slap of flesh and metal. "Thank you," Lucius said, and turned to go.

But Ron couldn't allow it to happen. He couldn't let Voldemort get his Horcrux back. In one movement he rolled, aimed and shot Malfoy in the back with the first spell he could think of. "Rictuseptra!"

Lucius immediately stopped and grabbed his sides. His hood fell to one side, and Ron could see his face twisted in agony as he began to laugh uncontrollably. Not the most brilliant of ideas Ron had ever come up with, but at least he hadn't gotten away. Another Death Eater then aimed at Ron, and he was able to roll out of the way a split second before the board his head had been on burst into blue flames. Hermione was moving now, too, and Ron saw her crawl toward Lucius. The wood ceiling overhead groan threateningly. It was just a matter of time before it came down on them all.

The other three Death Eaters made a mad dash for Lucius, who had collapsed under the Tickle Spell, and was now fetal trying to fight the laughter. One aimed at Hermione, and Ron hit him with, "Eat slugs!" The man staggered back, but it took a few seconds before he ripped off his hood and doubled over.

Neville shot another Death Eater, and Rourke another, but the last hit Ginny in the stomach with a Punching Charm just as she was getting to her feet, and she flew through the air, and landed hard against the stairs with a cry. Ron and Neville hit that Death Eater at the same time. Then not even a second later Ron was sliced with a Cutting Hex shot from the wizard vomiting giant slugs, and he felt the terrible burn sear across his arm and chest. He cried out, which distracted Hermione just long enough to be hit by the Cruciatus Curse. She screamed in agony and Ron cried out for her. After that things went a little hazy. He fired a couple of Ttrip Jinxes, and possibly a Stupefy Hex, but he may or may not have hit anyone. Neville flashed by him at one point, and Hermione screamed again. Ron tried as hard as he could to get to her, but his head was spinning and his chest felt as if it was on fire. When had it gotten cold? He reached out to her with his magic, needing to know that she was still there, and he found her easily. He held back, focused on not giving or taking. He felt her magic surge and swell around him as she cast hex after hex. There was nothing shallow about her well as she fired her spells, and Ron realized he was hearing fuzzy blasts somewhere in the distance, and knew they were coming from her.

Reassured, Ron managed to open his eyes and sit up. Neville had the locket clutched to his chest. Three of the Death Eaters had recovered enough to battle, as had Rourke. Ron saw the green bolt of energy come out of the third Death Eater's wand, and as if in slow motion he watched it soar through the room, past him and then Hermione. It lit the shadows and rubble with an eerie, sickly light before it hit Neville square in the chest.

It wasn't until it was all over that Ron realized the incantation the Death Eater had used. "DIE!"

The room exploded. Ron felt airborne. And then everything went silent and black.

End of chapter 20

Chapter 21 – The Count Down

The first thing Ron was aware of was the smell of smoke and charred wood, and of blood. There was a tightness across his chest, and pain. He reached up to run his fingers over it and felt the hot, stickiness of blood-soaked fabric, and the tenderness of a fresh wound. He groaned at the pain, but it wasn't anything like it had been before. He would live.

Ron managed to open his eyes, and had to blink a couple of times to understand where he was: on top of the remains of a wall, up against what used to be a display case. He looked down. The gash that had been slashed across his chest was closed. His head swam and dipped. He felt cold. He vomited.

"RON!" It was Hermione's voice, and she called to him again. He twisted his head, tried to find her through the smoke. Oh, there she was. By the stair.

"RON!" she screamed again. "I need you!"

He had to force his arms and legs to move, and it seemed a tremendous effort. Still dizzy, Ron managed to push himself up onto his feet and hold his balance. He blinked a couple of times.

"RON!"

Somehow he climbed over smoldering timbers. It was dark, Ron realized, and most of the light to see by came from the small fires still licking the debris on the floor. He looked up and saw stars. What had happened to the second story? They were still in the shop, weren't they? Looking for...what was his name? The archi...what was it again? Ron blinked, but it hurt his head, so he followed the sound of Hermione's shrill voice.

"You hurt?" he asked, when finally reached her. She looked battered and filthy, but she was moving much faster than he was. She was covered in blood. And then he realized that her hand was pressing her once-green jumper between Ginny's legs, and Ginny was on her back on the stairs and she wasn't moving. The blood was Ginny's.

"I haven't the energy to get her back St. Mungo's," Hermione said quickly. "Can you Apparate her there?"

"What happened to Ginny?" Ron asked. "Why is there so much blood?"

"I don't know," Hermione said, and then a sob escaped her, and Ron realized that she'd been crying. There were clean tracks down her face where the tears had washed away the soot. "I think...oh, Merlin, Ron. I think she's miscarrying."

They were words without meaning to Ron, and he stared down at his sister, more pale and lifeless than he'd ever seen. "Ginny..." escaped from his mouth.

"Ron!" Hermione yelled, grabbed his arm to make him look at her. "Take her to St. Mungo's!"

"But you-"

"I'm fine. I've got to find Neville."

"Neville," Ron said, and then exhaled. Ron remembered the green light, and then the "DIE!" "He's gone, Hermione."

"I have to look! Take Ginny! She's losing blood!"

Ron wasn't able to pick her up, so Hermione helped lean her limp body against him, and he concentrated on St. Mungo's emergency lobby and began the little twirl. The squeezing began almost immediately, and seemed to last forever. When Ron finally opened his eyes again he was looking at a pretty young healer in white robes rushing toward him.

"Help her," he said. Ginny was lifted from him, and he watched as a half dozen other healers swarmed around her. They floated her behind some curtains and out of sight.

"Are you quite all right?" asked a deep voice behind him. Ron turned to see a small, dark wizard looking at him with concern. "May I?" he asked. Ron nodded. The healer reached out and touched Ron's head, then shoulder, then chest. "Patch job. We'll need to fix that," he said. "Stopped the bleeding, though. Who ever Healed you likely saved your life. Oh, and looks like a concussion. You might want to lie down over there-"

Ron was sick on the healer's shoes.

"Right, then," said the wizard, and he pulled out a wand and Disappeared the mess. "Why don't you have a lie down and we'll see about setting you to rights?"

"My sister," Ron managed as the healer lead him to a cot.

"They're taking care of her," the wizard said.

"She's called Ginny."

The healer nodded. "I'll let them know."

Ron began to feel better almost immediately. Whatever it was that the healers had done to his head forced the pain back to a mere annoyance and settled his stomach. They cut his shirt off him, and he didn't much mind as it was ruined already. The wound Hermione had sealed had been deep, the healer told him, and he'd lost a lot of blood. Ron was given a vial to drink, and told that he needed to drink plenty of fluids over the next few days, and that he should be fine.

"Your girlfriend mended this?" the healer had asked. Ron didn't remember telling him that Hermione was his girlfriend, but he nodded anyway. "Lucky you. Hang on to that one, I say. You probably would've bled out before you got here, if not for her."

That stayed with Ron over the next few minutes while he contemplated the ceiling and his own mortality. And then Neville. They'd been completely unprepared for the Death Eaters to show up. Go in, get the locket, get out - that had been the plan. It had been Ron's plan. It was his fault he hadn't thought of contingencies, hadn't

planned for backup, hadn't brought more experienced people. It was his fault Neville was dead. A sinking sensation settled in his belly. It could've been Hermione.

And then she was there, staring at him, her eyes wide with tears. She was still a mess, and her fluffy hair was like a dark halo around her pale face. "They said you're going to be all right," she said, though she didn't sound as if she believed it.

He sat up for her. "I'm good. You?"

She rushed to him, and wrapped her arms around his middle. "I found Neville on Scrivenshaft's roof. He doesn't remember how he got there, but I figure he must've been blown there in the explosion. Can you believe it?" She pulled away from him and smiled through her tears. A laugh bubbled out. "He's alive! And aside from a few nasty bruises, he's going to be all right!"

Ron shook his head. He couldn't believe it. "But the Death Eater-"

"Killed the Horcrux," Hermione said, and a little hysterical giggle gurgled in her throat. "It protected Neville. A little poetic justice, I think."

Ron reached up and held her face as he kissed her gently on the mouth. He wiped a tear away with his thumb. "Have you seen Ginny?" he asked. "They won't let me see her."

She shook her head. "She's..." Hermione looked down and a tear dropped to Ron's wrist. "She lost the baby."

"She lost the baby?" The sentence didn't make any sense to him. "What are you talking about? Who's baby?"

"Hers," Hermione told him. Her voice hitched. "Hers and Harry's."

She was serious and upset, and Ron couldn't wrap his mind around it. Ginny and Harry didn't have a baby. She was only sixteen. "No," Ron said, and he pushed Hermione out from between his knees. "No."

"I didn't know anything about it, either," Hermione told him. "I'm not even sure Ginny knew."

"How could she not know?" he demanded, and pushed off the bed. He couldn't sit still with this new knowledge. He paced the little alcove where they'd put him to recover.

"It's not always clear – not at the beginning-

"He did this! How could he do that to her?"

"Oh, Ron," Hermione said, suddenly sounding tired. "I'm sure she was just as much a willing participant as he'd been."

"He wasn't careful!"

"Sometimes people aren't." She wasn't looking at him while she said this, but at his dirty trainers. "Sometimes people are caught up in the moment. Like we were, in the Prefect's bathroom..."

Ron froze. His heart skipped a beat. He remembered that night in the Prefect's bathroom. Portions of that memory he'd replayed over and over for weeks afterward. Suddenly it was difficult to swallow. "What are you trying to tell me?" Ron asked, though his voice seemed to have left him and it came out more as a whisper than anything else.

"Nothing," she said quietly. "Just that it wasn't Harry's fault. It wasn't anyone's fault. These things just happen sometimes."

"Hermione..." he begged.

"I'm not," she said quickly. "Three days later I knew for certain I wasn't. But we weren't careful that one time, and it could've happened to us, just like it happened to them. Don't blame Harry-

And as if she conjured him, Harry was there, and his hand was on Ron's throat, and Ron was pressed against the wall. "What did you do?" Harry demanded through gritted teeth. "They said she nearly died!"

Ron choked, but couldn't get a word out. Hermione screamed for Harry to stop, and pulled on his arm. Ron was less worried about being strangled and more scared of the wiggle he felt clawing its way around his well. He pushed back against Harry's shoulders, and when that didn't work, Harry's face. Harry had to be drawing his physical strength from Ron, there was no other explanation. Earlier that day he couldn't even walk on his own. And now the sides of Ron's vision were starting to dim a little, and white lights sparkled everywhere. Harry's angry eyes poured into him.

"What did you do," Harry said again. This time there was no question.

"Harry! You're going to hurt him!" Leave it to Hermione to remind them of the obvious. Harry wanted to hurt him. Ron could see it in his eyes. "Harry, please! It wasn't his fault!"

This made Harry turn on Hermione. "You left without me!" he spat at her. "Without even telling me! And you took her!"

"Oh, Harry," Hermione said, and more tears followed. "I'm so terribly sorry!"

Harry shook his head, gave Ron a shove, and turned. "They won't let me see her," he said, his back to them. "They say she's in a bad way."

"She lost...a lot of blood," Hermione said, and Ron could see her dance around the heart of the issue. "Her back was broken in the fall, but they've got that mended all ready."

"Then why won't they let me see her?" he asked, pleaded really, and he turned back to her. His desperate eyes searched hers in an intimate way. "What could possibly have happened that they won't let me see her?"

"I...I think," Hermione began, and then had to start again. There was something unspoken going on between them, and Ron knew she was about to tell Harry a truth he wasn't prepared to hear. "I think it's not so much that they won't let you see her as, well, I don't think she wants to see you. Right now. Just now. I'm sure-"

"But why?" Harry demanded. His hands fisted, and Ron could tell from the tension in his body that he was forcing himself not to grab her.

"Maybe you should sit down, mate," Ron suggested quietly.

"Why? Please! Somebody bloody tell me what is going on!"

And Hermione began with the four of them going to the shop, and then questioning the archimagitect, and then the Death Eater's arrival, and the fight. And how Ginny was Punched back and hit the stairs hard enough to splinter the treads down the middle, and how she was pregnant and how Hermione couldn't stop the bleeding. And how Ron saved Ginny's life by getting her to St. Mungo's faster than anyone else could've, but that the baby was lost. Gone.

Harry's expression slowly went blank as he processed the story. Ron was waiting for the wiggle inside him to grow, but it never did. If anything Harry began to pull back.

"Harry, breathe," Hermione said, and she touched him, but he jerked away as if burned.

Shaking his head he turned and left the alcove and every step he took down the corridor came faster and faster until he was running around the corner and down the next hall. Ron followed with Hermione beside him. Ahead, Ron saw as one of the healers tried to prevent him from going into Ginny's room. Harry lifted a hand, and Ron felt a tug, and the healer was thrown back against the wall. Harry hadn't taken his wand out, and he hadn't spoke a word.

When Harry disappeared into her room, Ron no longer felt the pull on his energy. By the time they caught up to him, Harry was already by her bed, holding her hand. Their heads were bowed together. They cried together. Harry's hand went to her belly, and hers covered his.

Hermione pulled at Ron's arm. "Give them some time," she told him quietly. Ron nodded. That was why Harry had stopped siphoning off

Ron's magic, Ron realized - Harry wanted to be completely alone with Ginny.

Neville showed up a moment later looking a little worse for wear. "They said Ginny was-"

"Harry's with her," Hermione said quickly.

"Oh," Neville said, and he looked toward her door. "Is she going to be all right?"

"We don't know yet." She turned to Ron. "We have fourteen days."

He hadn't even thought about the prophecy. A fortnight was what it promised after the fifth Horcrux was destroyed. Fourteen days before the most evil, powerful wizard in the world was going to come for them.

"Harry's not ready, Ron. None of us are ready," she added, grimly. "But especially Harry. And now this. What are we going to do?" She wanted an easy answer, something that would reassure her. Ron didn't have any for her.

It wasn't completely surprising when hospital security showed up and hauled Harry away. He had, of course, assaulted a healer. But he didn't fight them, he didn't have the energy. Halfway down the hall his feet stopped working and they had to drag him. At the end of the hall Harry went completely limp. Ron and Hermione ran to him, all while the healers bent over him and tried to determine the problem.

"He's weak," Ron called to them, and then when he was close enough he added, "His magic is weak."

"It's more than his magic," one of the healers said. "He's been infected. Looks like it's been there a long time."

"Infected?" Hermione asked. She looked horrified.

"By a particularly bad curse. Can't you see what it's done to him?" This from another healer. "How he's managed to walk around I'll never know."

"He threw Angie against the wall," the first healer told them. "Didn't even need his wand!"

Harry's arms were checked for the Dark Mark.

"Oh, for magic's sake," Hermione snapped, "he's Harry Potter!"

"Doesn't seem to make much of a difference these days, does it?" the healer asked. Then he produced a wand and levitated Harry into a nearby room.

"What's going to happen to him?" Hermione called after them. "What are you going to do? Is he going to be all right?" No response came. She turned to Ron. "Tell me he's going to be all right. Lie if you have to, but I need to hear it."

She stepped against him, pressed her forehead into his chest. Ron wrapped his arms around her. "He's going to be all right," he told her dutifully. "And Ginny. We're all going to be just fine."

That night Ron made love to Hermione in their bed at the castle, slowly and moodily. For a brief few minutes he was able to forget about everything that was happening and just sink inside her. Even Moody's rant when they had returned to Hogwarts fell away. It was a blissful snatch of time, and over all-too quickly.

"Most of the potions Neville, Marchbanks and I have been working on are finished," Hermione whispered as they lay together under the sheets. She'd retreated back to her side of the bed once they were done. "Ron, I failed you today."

He turned and looked at her in the dark. "What d'ya mean? You save my life, Ginny's life-"

"I've been training to be a battlefield healer. And when you and Ginny and Neville were hit, I didn't stop to help you. That's what I'm supposed to be there for. Like the Death Eaters who attacked Viktor

and his family. You know Voldemort will have at least a few who hang back and heal. It should've been me."

"There was so much happening at once," Ron told her. "You had to make instinctual decisions-

"If I had gotten to Ginny sooner," she whispered.

"No," Ron sternly told her. He rolled on his side and propped his head on his hand. "Don't do that. She took a Punch to the stomach. There was nothing anyone could've done." She took a deep breath, like she was trying accept what he'd said.

But Ginny made him think of other things, like what they'd done – or not done – in the Prefect's bath. "Hermione," he said quietly. "You're sure you're not...with child?"

"I'm sure," she told him. "Don't worry."

"If you were, well, you could tell me. I wouldn't be...mad, or anything."

"I know," she said.

"The thing is," Ron said, and he reached out and ran a finger down her arm. "The thought of having a baby...with you...you and me...well, it's not so bad as I once thought."

"Jack's gotten to you," she said, and he could hear a smile in her voice.

"I think you've gotten to me," Ron told her, with all seriousness.

"But don't you want to wait? Until Jack's a little older. Until we're a little older?"

"You're bloody right, I do! But if it happened, well, it wouldn't be the end of the world, that's all."

She reached out and brushed the hair back from the side of his face. Her touch was feather-light. "You think Ginny knew and didn't tell anyone? That she was afraid?"

"I don't know," Ron said, but he did think that. It was like a fist in his chest. And if she had told them, any of them, then she never would've gone with them to Hogsmeade, and she never would've gotten hurt.

"Well," Hermione said as she leaned closer to him. "I'm not Ginny." She pressed her lips to his, and then her tongue. He returned her kiss. His hand found her hip under the blankets, slid down over her rear, and he squeezed her to him.

But he couldn't make love to her again. He couldn't get the thought that Ginny had been pregnant out of his head. Another little Jack had died. Ron pulled away from his girl, and settled on his back once more. She went with him this time, though, and nestled in the crook of his arm. He was happy to hold her close.

"Harry won't forgive us for going without him," Ron whispered. "Even if there wasn't anything he could've done, he'll never forgive me for going without tell him. And taking Ginny."

"I know," Hermione whispered back. "But maybe he's not supposed to. 'For some Hearts will surely be broken, and some deeds cannot be Forgiven, and some Secrets are meant to be told.'"

"The Fates knew this would happen? They tried to warn us, didn't they?"

"Or maybe just prepare us for the inevitable."

Moody was briefed once they got back to Hogwarts that night, as were McGonagall and Lupin. Preparation for the attack began that night. Ghosts and portraits were put on full alert, all non-combating Order members were evacuated to some stronghold unknown to Ron for security reasons, and the rest began to seal off the castle. There wasn't any way they could defend the entire structure, so entire wings were closed off with powerful Locking Spells. The fewer places the Death Eaters had to hide, the better.

The Inferius had made it over the Scottish border and were closing in on Howarts with alarming speed. Werewolf attacks had become more and more frequent, and the newest estimates had their numbers in the hundreds. All news of vampire activity had ceased, which worried Moody the most. They hadn't gone, he'd insisted, which meant they were waiting.

It was the next day, just as Ron and Hermione were going down to the main gate to go to St. Mungo to see Harry and Ginny that the alarm was raised. Both of them whipped out their wands, and the Grey Lady was with them, but as she wasn't corporeal, there wasn't much she could do to help. Luckily the three Order guards at the gate already had the situation in hand.

The short, round figure at the gate didn't look like an Inferi, Ron decided. Far too much flesh. And he didn't wear the black robes of a Death Eater.

"Is that Slughorn?" Ron asked. It was hard to tell through the gates, but the squat figure did look a lot like their former Potions teacher.

"Hard to tell," Hermione said, and started once again down to the gate.

When they arrived it was clear that he wasn't going to be allowed entrance.

"But-but-but," Slughorn stammered. "But I've come at great physical peril to myself! Do you have any idea who I am?"

Sturgis Podmore, one of the guards currently on duty, and an Order veteran of two wars now, held a firm wand on Slughorn through the gate. He looked a lot like Ron dad, Ron decided, only dark in coloring and thinner. And taller. "Just go home, Slughorn," Podmore commanded. "We're under lock-down. Things are going to get ugly here very shortly, and we all know you don't want any of that."

"Yes, yes," Slughorn said. He gripped the iron gate and pressed his round face between the bars. "Anyone with half a brain can see that.

Put two and two together, I can." He noticed Hermione and his face lightened. "Ah, my dear, go and fetch your friend Harry, now there's a good lass."

"Harry's not here," she told him. And then to Podmore she said, "He's coming with us. Send a ghost up to tell Moody he's come to help. We'll be back from St. Mungus as soon as we can."

"Come on," Ron told Slughorn. "Though I'm not sure you'll be enough to cheer Harry at the moment."

"St. Mungo's?" Slughorn echoed, and pulled a handkerchief from his pocket to dab at his face. "So the rumors are true? You-Know-Who's attacked him?"

"Not yet," Ron told him. "He's still got thirteen days."

Harry was awake when they got there, and Ginny was sitting by his bed. The two of them looked the pair: pale, thin, sad. Ginny wore jeans and a shirt, though, - not the hospital robes that Harry wore - and Ron took this to be a good sign. Neither of them said anything when he and Hermione came in, but Harry nearly jumped out of the bed when he saw who they brought with them.

"Slughorn!" Harry said, shocked. "What are you...? Where did Moody find you?" Moody had been looking for the elusive Horace Slughorn for more than a week now.

"I came on my own," Slughorn said told him. "I'd like to think I'm a wizard of some honor, and I've a debt to pay."

"The Death Eaters destroyed your home, didn't they?" Harry asked sardonically.

"It wasn't my home, but how they found me I'll never know."

"He's been telling us about Horcruxes," Ron said to Harry. "And they can be living creatures, but it's more than just killing the creature, you have to-"

"You need to leave," Harry interrupted him. "Now."

"Oh, Harry," said Hermione.

"You, too," he told her. If looks alone could kill both Ron and Hermione would've been dead a hundred times over.

Ginny touched Harry's arm. "Harry-"

"No!" he snapped, and yanked his arm away. "I won't have them here as if I trust them!"

"You trust me, don't you?" she asked quietly. She didn't meet his eyes, as if she was afraid of what his answer might be.

"I love you," he whispered.

"That's not the same thing," Ginny told him.

"No," he agreed, "it's not."

Her face shifted in pain, and she nodded her head ever so slightly. "You need them, Harry. The prophecy demands it. 'The Dark One will end with an evil death, only if the Chosen can keep his Forgiven Secret.'"

Did everyone have the blasted thing memorized? Ron couldn't imagine where they'd found the time.

"The Fates have told you," Ginny murmured low, "that you need them."

"They also told me to protect you, and I didn't manage to do that, did I?"

She shook her head. "That was my fault, not yours."

"Not to intrude, but there's nothing productive about placing blame at this time. What's happened has happened, and we've less than a fortnight now to-" Hermione stopped when Ron touched her arm.

"Shall I begin by telling you what I know about thwarting vampires? They're a strong, seductive lot, but you'd be surprised what a pot of spaghetti can do to them." Slughorn offered one of his disarming grins and pulled a chair from the corner to rest his bulk on.

"Now I got this from Blodwyn Bludd, himself – oh, yes! A particularly colorful fellow, I assure you, and a bloody good singer! No pun intended, of course."

Harry dozed off and on that day, as healers came in and fed him potion after potion. Hermione took notes as best as she could. Ginny remained quiet and withdrawn, and towards the end of Slughorn's diatribe on Gideon Crumb, The Weird Sisters bagpipe player, and his "ignorance of all things were-", Ginny's eyes became heavy and she started to slip to one side as she drifted off. Ron guided her head down to his shoulder, and she settled against him. Harry watched this with an indecipherable expression.

"And I told the boy, 'Crumb!' I said, 'You must understand that werecats can't be domesticated!'"

"Uh, professor," Hermione said, politely cutting in. "Thank you so much for everything that you've told us today. I'm sure we'll have hundreds of questions for you, but at the moment I think we'd best get Ginny back to Hogwarts and in to bed. She's had a difficult couple of days."

"She's good to go, then?" Ron asked.

Harry nodded, his eyes full of his girlfriend. "I wish I could go back with you," he said. "They're saying at least a month in here for me."

"Uh...Harry?" Hermione said hesitantly. Her eyes went wide and questioning at Ron. "Didn't anyone...I thought I told you. About the Horcrux."

Harry's brows furrowed even farther. "I thought you said we had the Horcrux. That Neville got it."

"Well, he did," Hermione said. "But then the Death Eaters-"

"No!" Harry cried, and Ginny sat up, startled, and her wand was instantly in her hand. Ron tried to calm her as Harry went on with, "Don't tell me the Death Eaters took it! That Voldemort has it!"

"Oh, no," Hermione assured him. "They certainly don't have it, and that's a good thing, right? It's good that they don't have it. That Voldemort doesn't have it. It would've been devastating if they'd managed to steal the locket. Devastating. But, they don't have it, thank Merlin. But...well...well, I'm afraid that there was a bit of a-"

"A Death Eater blew it up," Ron said, unable to take her nervous blabbering any longer. "He tried to kill Neville with that 'Die' curse, and instead hit the Horcrux and blew half the store to bits in the process. Neville's fine, by the way."

"It's...but then..." The realization of just what all of this meant filtered through his brain and registered on Harry's face. He looked down at his boney, pale hands helplessly. "I can't possibly defeat him like this. I can't possibly - how many days do I have? I can't possibly..."

"Of course you will!" Ginny said fiercely, and burst into tears. She grabbed her stomach, and Ron thought she might be sick, but in the next moment she bolted from the room.

"I'll go after her," Hermione said, and before she reached the door Harry called her name.

"Tell her...tell her I love her," Harry said. "Tell her..."

"We'll be back to pick you up tomorrow," Hermione said. "We don't have a month. I wish we did, but we don't. Get as much rest as you can tonight, and then, tomorrow you can tell her yourself."

When she left Harry closed his eyes and let his head fall back into the pillow supporting him. "You should all get as far away from me as you can. When Voldemort takes power you won't be safe anywhere near here. Go to Australia if you can. Hell, go to the moon."

"If Voldemort wins, there won't be any point," Ron told him. "But he won't. He can't. The prophecy promises an evil death to the Dark Lord-"

"If I do hundred things, and I've already blown half of them!"

"You have to keep Hermione and me with you," Ron corrected. "And you have to keep Ginny safe."

"Exactly!" Harry yelled.

"She's safe, mate. Yes, she's in pain, and yes her heart's broken..." Was that what the prophecy meant? Not that the Heart would be broken, but that her heart would be? Or his? "Ginny's here, though. She's alive, and under the circumstances I'd say she's doing well."

"She just lost a baby!" Harry barked. "Our baby! How well do you think she could possibly be doing?" He shoved the heels of his hands into his eyes. "Bloody hell. I can't believe she was pregnant."

"Oh, my," said Slughorn, his eyes alight with this newest bit of gossip. Ron was sure he'd entertain parties with this conversation for decades to come.

And then, even with both Ron and Slughorn sitting there, Harry dissolved into tears.

Ron turned to their former professor. "Do you mind?" he asked. "We need some privacy."

"Oh. Oh! Certainly," Slughorn said. It took a little doing, as they'd been sitting there for hours, but Slughorn managed to push himself up from the chair and toddle out the door.

"Harry, mate. I'm really sorry for what happened. We all are, but me in particular. You were right when you said that it was my fault. It was my idea, and I was the one who didn't want to tell you, just because I knew you weren't in any shape to come with us. I had no idea that the Death Eaters were so close to getting the Horcrux, too. We were just

going to go and get it, and then get back to Hogwarts before anyone knew we were gone. That was the plan. In and out, easy-like."

"It's never easy," Harry told him, and sniffled.

"No, I suppose it's not." Ron looked down at his knees while Harry dried his face with the blankets and made an attempt to compose himself through a lot of snorts and deep breaths.

When he was ready, Ron continued. "It was never Ginny or Hermione, it was all me, so be angry at me."

"I am," Harry told him darkly.

Ron hadn't expected such a frank response. "Well, good then. You deserve to be. And if you can never forgive me, I completely understand-"

"I won't," Harry assured.

"Uh...all right." This wasn't going how Ron had envisioned it in his head.

"She can't...have any others," Harry said without looking at Ron. "Babies, I mean. They said there was too much damage done. There won't ever be any more."

Ron's brows rose and an strange twisting clenched his gut. That he really hadn't expected. With one Punching Spell not only was Ginny's baby killed, but all her future children as well. She'd never be a mother. Harry would never have a Jack. "I'm...I'm sorry." It was such a lame thing to say, but Ron didn't have any other words. "Harry-"

"Just...get out," Harry said weakly. "Please, just go."

Ron nodded even though Harry had closed his eyes to him. There was nothing else he could do there, and there was too much to be done back at Hogwarts. He found Hermione and Ginny in the corridor, holding each other. Ginny was weeping on Hermione's shoulder,

shaking from head to foot. Hermione had tears down her cheeks, too, as she looked to Ron with weary eyes.

Moody had told Ron once that before the war was over that he would become an intimate of grief and loss. Ron had never imagined that all of them would.

It felt so good to hold Jack once they got back to Hogwarts. Remus seemed to understand Ron's need to coddle the baby, and settled back to enjoy his evening tea while Ron held Jack on his lap and played with his tiny fists. The evening was quite civilized, Ron decided, considering what was approaching them at that very moment. The primary Order members had gathered in McGonagall's quarters, without Ginny, who had collapsed into bed, still crying, as soon as they got back to the castle. Hermione had made her a weak sleeping draught, and she'd settled into sleep an hour or so later.

Moody added Firewhiskey to his own tea cup, and Hermione held out hers for a dram as well. His magical eye swung around to focus on her, but Moody poured the drink, which she thanked him for. Slughorn finished off his fifth cake, and helped himself to another. No one else seemed to have much of an appetite.

"So," said Bill, finally breaking the silence that had followed Slughorn's lecture on defeating all things dark and undead. "Basically the inferius' weakness is fire and sunlight."

"As long as they have flesh on bone, of course," Slughorn added generously. "Without the flesh they're skeletons, and that's a completely different spell. We've not seen any evidence that You-Know-Who has any necromancers under his control who can animate a skeleton. I don't doubt that there's one or two out there, mind you. But, well, it's the Inferius we're worried about at the moment."

"If we burn the flesh from the Inferius...?" Hermione asked.

"Yes," Slughorn said. "You've always been a bright one. If you burn the flesh from the bones then they cease to...live is the wrong word."

"Then, the vampires," Bill said. "They're deathly allergic to silver and sunlight, but as we expect them in the middle of the night, and none of us has any experience in Muggle combat – except for Hagrid-"

"Oh," Hagrid spoke up over his own bucket of Zombini's, "I've never used anything more than a club. Wouldn't know what to do with something silver."

"Yes, well, that doesn't give us much on the vampires, then, does it?" Bill asked as glumly as they all felt. "Which leaves us with the werewolves. I think we're all aware that there's not much beyond brute force that can put them down. We should, I suppose, go over some of the better Cutting and Punching Hexes."

"It's no coincidence that all of these creatures are of the night – and that the attack should come at night," Slughorn said lightly. "Is it?"

"Well, of course not," Hermione said smartly. "If they came while the sun was up the vampires would fall terribly sick and burn up, the werewolves would be in their human forms, and the Inferi wouldn't be animated, would they? That doesn't take a genius to work out that Voldemort would choose to attack at night."

Slughorn looked expectantly at her and smiled. "Work it out, my lovely little genius," he said encouragingly. Hermione glared at him, but Ron could see she was mentally going back over what she'd just said. She looked to Ron for help.

"What?" he asked. "You're the lovely one." This made her smirk sarcastically.

"If you know the answer, Horace, please do let us in on it," McGonagall said tiredly. She's been working just as hard as the rest of them, and Ron knew she was in need of sleep as much as he was. Maybe more – she was old, after all.

"In a moment, Minerva," Slughorn said genially. "She's almost got it."

Hermione didn't look so sure. "Surely there's not a spell to create day out of night," she slowly said.

"Sprites abound!" McGonagall exclaimed, and nearly bounced out of her chair.

Moody sat up as well. "You know the spell?" he demanded of Slughorn, almost accusingly.

"Oh, no, no! I assure you, I don't even dabble in the Dark Arts!"

"How could it be a dark spell if it's creating daylight?" Ron asked.

"Because it would change the very fabric of the natural world," Hermione explained.

"Right, but turning the sun on is a long way from animating the dead," Ron quipped.

"You'd be changing the rotation of the Earth about its axis, Mr. Weasley," McGonagall said tartly. "I would assume even you would see the inherent danger in that."

"But he doesn't even know the spell," Ron protested. "What good does this do us?"

"No, I most certainly don't know that spell," Slughorn said with a grin on his face. "But I do know another." He finished off his cake, licked his fingers clean, and pulled out his wand. Then he aimed at the high ceiling above them. "Solaris minute," he called out, and instantly a blinding yellow ball blazed down on them.

The demonstration was impressive, made all the more so when the ceiling caught fire. Once the sun and subsequent fire were doused, they began to talk animatedly about what this meant for the Order. Certainly their strategy for the final battle would change, and Ron would have to discuss tactics with Moody. And Harry, he reminded himself. Harry would be back the next day, one way or the other. Seven Order members had volunteered to protect Harry at St. Mungo's that night, and were instructed to escort him to Hogwarts the next morning as soon as he was able to walk. Harry would most certainly have something to say about all of this.

The next day Harry arrived looking remarkably better. He was still weak, and the Apparition from St. Mungo's and the short broom flight to the castle had physically drained him enough for him to collapse on his bed and slip almost instantly into sleep. Ginny settled the blankets around him, touched the side of his face with a tenderness that left a lump at the back of Ron's throat. She truly loved Harry. Ron could see that plain as day. When she looked up and found Ron staring at her, her face crumbled, and she fled the room.

"Ginny," Ron called after her, and he caught up to her down at the far end of the corridor. She stopped when he touched her arm, and pushed herself against the wall. Her head hung and arms wrapped tight around her middle as she sobbed. It killed him to see her hurting so much. "Can you talk to me about it?"

She shook her head.

"To Hermione, then?"

This brought out another gut-wrenching sob. She covered her mouth in a useless attempt to keep it in.

"It's about Harry, isn't it?" He didn't have to be brilliant to figure that out. She nodded. "Did you two have a row?" He couldn't imagine that they'd had enough time together to fight, but he was grasping at fairy dust. She shook her head no, and inhaled deeply to ward off any further fits.

"It's about..." He motioned to her belly.

"No," she whispered.

"Then it's just Harry, then?"

With a sigh, Ginny looked up to the ceiling. "I'm so scared for him," she managed to get out before she hiccupped another sob. "Ron, he's not even pretending anymore that he can best V-vo-" She couldn't force the name out. "He knows that he's too weak to put up any kind of real fight. I'm going to lose him, Ron. Because no matter

what the rest of us do to protect him, in the end it will be between Harry and You-Know-Who. And Harry can't win."

"You're forgetting one thing," Ron told her. "In the end, Harry has a Smisurato."

"You?" she laughed and cried together. "Against the most powerful wizard in the world?" The she hung her head again and sniffled. "I'm going to lose you both."

Ron collected her in his arms, and squeezed her slight form tightly. She hugged him back. "If you want to go back to the Burrow, no one would think less of you, you know. In fact, Harry might be relieved. It might make things easier for him."

"I can't," she told him. "The prophecy says the Chosen has to protect his Heart in order to defeat the Dark Lord. I have to be here to be protected."

Ron held her out at arm's length. "You don't know that," he said. "It doesn't have to be a literal protection. It's not a literal heart, after all. He could be protecting you by sending you away-"

She pulled Ron back to her. "Oh, Ron," she whispered. "If he's going to die, then I want to be with him."

Ron stroked her long, smooth hair. He'd never done that before, never had this closeness with his sister. With the petty childishness of their youth gone, Ron wanted nothing now for her except to live a long, happy life. He hated the idea that she might have neither. She was his baby sister, his only sister. And for the first time what that really meant dawned on him.

Ron looked up, and saw Harry standing just outside their door. He didn't know how much of their conversation Harry had heard, if any at all; the shadows hid his expression.

"You should talk to Harry about this," Ron whispered in her hair.

"I can't. He's got too much to worry about already."

"I'm sure he's already worrying about this on his own," Ron told her. "I'm sure he's worrying about you."

"If it was Hermione, and not Harry who had to face You-Know-Who..."

"Don't ask me that," he whispered into her hair. "It's bad enough that it's Harry. I know you love him, Ginny, but he's my best mate. I can't imagine living without him, either."

"You're girlfriend's watching us," she said, and he thought he heard a small smile in her voice. Ron turned and saw Hermione over his other shoulder. She stood still, looking worried about intruding.

"You're boyfriend is, too," Ron told her, and Ginny twisted in his embrace to see Harry still standing down by their room. "Come on. Hermione's not had a chance to see him since he got back from hospital. Let's give them their moment." He raised his arm and beckoned to Hermione to join them, and then started back toward Harry.

They all filed in the room, Hermione with an arm full of vials, presumably for Harry to try. The girls went in first, and Harry tugged gently at Ron's shoulder, pulling him aside.

"Everything all right?" Harry asked. "With Ginny?"

Hermione put her free arm around Ginny's shoulders as they walked to the small table. It was difficult to imagine anyone being all right in her position. "She will be," Ron said at last. "When we win."

"Right," said Harry, darkly.

Hermione set up a line of vials, and once Harry climbed into bed she explained: "These are from the healers at St. Mungo's. They said one dose every hour for the next two days. After that, every twelve hours. At that point, Harry, you can start taking these. They're strengtheners that will assist the other potions. You get one blue vial with the others every six hours, and one yellow vial in between the others every

twenty-four. I've written it all down so you can keep track of which you've taken and when." She produced a parchment and placed it on the table.

"Can't...won't you give them to Harry?" Ginny asked, eyes wide and watery and worried.

"Uh..." Hermione glanced at Harry, but he didn't meet her gaze. "I'm...that is, Ron and I, well, we've got a bed down in the Potions classroom now. I'm down there all the time anyway, and it makes sense that with the two of you needing to rest that you should have more quiet and privacy."

It did make sense, but Ron knew it hadn't been Hermione's idea. Harry wanted them out.

"You're going to sleep in Potions?" Ginny asked, startled by the very idea. She turned and looked at Harry, who was busying himself with righting the blankets over his legs.

"There's just a couple of things I need to get," Hermione said lightly, "and then we'll be out of your way."

"I didn't realize you were in my way," Ginny said pointedly.

Ron watched as Hermione collected some books and a shirt of his, and a couple more things from around the room and dumped them all in his trunk. "It's important to rest, Ginny," Hermione reminded her. "In two days we're going to start up our lessons again, and begin to review all the offensive and defensive spells that Moody and Slughorn have devised. It's going to mean long, exhausting days. Take advantage of your time alone."

Hermione pulled out her wand and levitated Ron's trunk out the door. "Harry..." she said before she left. "I'm sorry I didn't realize you'd been infected by that curse sooner. In retrospect the symptoms...well...I'm terribly sorry-" Her voice broke and she hurried out.

Ginny started after her, and then turned to glare at her boyfriend. "Harry James Potter! What have you done?"

His sister's voice sounded so very like his mother's when she was about to go on a rampage, that Ron decided to follow his own girlfriend.

The Potions classroom still looked – and smelled – like the Potions he had known so well for six years. The exception was that the last two rows of desks had been pushed aside to allow for a bed, and now, Ron's trunk. All the other desks, including the Potions Master's, were completely covered with flasks and beakers and cauldrons bubbling away.

On a tall stool, a small, stooped old witch dressed in mauve robes was hunched over a particularly large cauldron, stirring rhythmically; twice to the left, three times to the right. She smiled as they came in, but turned, turtle-like, back to her brew.

Ron looked between the bed that sat so very out of place, and Griselda Marchbanks, who had given him an E for his Potions O.W.L.s. "Uh...Hermione," he whispered to her from across the room. "She's not staying all night, is she? She's got a room of her own, yes?"

"You don't have to worry," Hermione said with a smirk, and in a normal voice. "Madame Marchbanks is quite hard of hearing. And yes, she has a room of her own."

Ron looked back at the bed. Hermione hadn't yet transfigured it into a double. "So, Harry kicked us out?"

"It was bound to happen," she told him. "And anyway, they should have some privacy. It'll help with their recuperation."

"He's got us living in the dungeons," Ron said flatly. "It's not about privacy."

She sniffed a couple of bubbling flasks, and lowered the flames under them with her wand. "No. He made it quite clear that he's still upset."

"He told me he wouldn't forgive me," Ron said.

She looked at him, startled. "He said that?" Then she thought about it and shook her head. "There's not really anything to forgive. Even if he'd been there the outcome most likely would've been much the same. And if he'd refused to let us go, then Voldemort would now have the Horcrux, and Harry can't want that. No, he's just upset. Understandably. And he's taking it out on us. Well, you actually," Hermione said with an apologetic expression. "He just needs some time."

"That's your answer for everything, isn't it?" Ron snapped. "Time can't possibly fix everything. A week doesn't go by and then bang, it's all back to normal!"

"He's grieving," Hermione said sternly. "And so is Ginny. And he's anxious over this battle. And he's still healing. Harry's got a lot on his plate at the moment-"

"I'm not saying he doesn't," Ron insisted. "But I'd like, once again, to draw your attention the fact that our bed is in the dungeon."

"Oh, Ron, I chose to put it here," she said with a heavy sigh. "I need to be with the potions all the time, and this was easier for me. If you don't want to sleep down here, then you can find someplace else."

Ron sat up. This had gotten his attention. "Someplace else?" he asked, and his voice went a little squeaky there at the end. "You mean for me?"

She spared him a glance, and then went back to adding a leafy something to one of the cauldrons. "I meant for us." There was a self-satisfied smirk at the corner of her lips just dying to show itself. "I don't really care where we sleep. I don't plan on doing too much of it."

"Oh, well, then." Ron relaxed a little. Moving the bed, finding another empty room, it seemed an awful lot of work. "Here's fine, I reckon."

"Mmm." She didn't sound surprised. "Weren't you supposed to find Lupin?"

"Oh. Right." Ron was to take Jack for the rest of the day to give Lupin a bit of a rest. And, as it was probably close to dinner, as his stomach was growling, he decided to head up to the Great Hall to see if he could find him there.

"Hungry?" he asked Hermione.

"No time," she told him, distracted by the Half-Blood Prince's writing. Her finger ran beneath a line of scrawl in the margin and she added a pinch of some red powder and began to stir the contents of the glass flask. It turned from green to blue.

He left her there, buried in her work, certain she hadn't heard him go. It was three nights later than Ron found himself impaled on a tree. He looked down at the arrow protruding from his shoulder, at the brown quail feathers on his shaft, and wondered how he'd managed to find himself in this predicament. It seemed odd to be shot by an arrow, archaic. Not to mention bloody painful. The awkward way he sort of hung there by his shoulder with the heavy trunk behind him, holding him up didn't help as much as one might imagine. He lifted his wand with his other hand, but he hadn't a clue as to which spell to use. Funny how Arrow Removing Charms had never come up during his studies at Hogwarts.

In the next moment the arrow was gone and Ron slid down the tree into a heap at its base. He caught a flash of Hermione fly by, and then another blue blast that missed her by inches. When she looped around, she hit his shoulder with some sort of orange glow - there was far too much noise and chaos to understand what charm she used - and the searing pain was gone. Ron found he could move, could stand, and he leapt up in search of another vampire to dispatch.

It wasn't long after that he heard Ginny's call for "Solarus minute," and an enormous orange-ish yellow ball exploded to life just above the forest they were fighting in. Instantly several of the vampires Ron could see turned into bats and fled. One, off to his right was so

wounded by the hexes Harry had hit her with, that the vampire simply collapsed to the ground. Her skin peeled back like plastic under heat. She screamed a horrible howl, and then burst into flames. Within minutes she was nothing but ash.

"Good work!" Moody said, as he called them all to meet near the mossy boulder in the heather clearing.

Harry was sweating and winded, and he pulled his glasses off to wipe them with his shirt. Ginny came up beside him, also breathing hard, her ginger hair pulled back from her flush face.

Hermione, however, looked as if she'd been having a fine time. She bound over a downed tree and met the rest of them with an enormous smile that Ron found contagious. It was Neville and Elphias Doge who looked worse for wear. Neither, it seemed, was used to prolonged exercise. Firenze, the only centaur professor Hogwarts had ever seen, trotted up beside Moody, and Hagrid lumbered to Moody's other side. They'd all come for the night lesson, to brush up on their own skills as much as to help Harry and the rest of them get some practical battle experience.

"Weasley," Moody snapped, meaning Ginny, of course. "How many enemies did we face?"

"I counted eight."

"There were thirteen," Hermione quickly corrected. "Seven got away."

"Potter," Moody said after an appraising look at Hermione. "How many did you down?"

"Two," Harry told him. "But I downed them both three times. They don't like the stay down."

"A good lesson," Moody said gruffly.

"They were able to fly away when Ginny made the sun," Neville said glumly. "I thought the sun was supposed to kill them."

"Only if they're too weak or damaged to fly," Moody told him. "The key is to incapacitate as many as possible before we sun them."

"But surely we're not out to kill as many vampires as we can," Hermione challenged. "We just don't want them to attack us. The sun will protect us."

"It's them or us," Moody barked at her. "Never forget that!" Then he turned to Ginny. "Nice spell work there at the end. McGonagall says you've been working hard in your lessons."

Ginny nodded at the praise but it didn't seem to please her.

"This has been a productive evening," Firenze said. His deep voice vibrated right through Ron. "We should return to the castle now."

"Aye," Hagrid agreed. "The real sun'll be up afore long, and we don't wana to disturb the li'l creatures in this forest any more than we 'ave to."

Ginny pointed her wand at her sun, and muttered, "Extinguish minute." The sun turned white and then folded in on itself with a bang. They were left in a darkness spotted by the shadows of the false sun.

They turned and headed back to the Portkey by the light of Harry and Moody's wands, and Ron slipped his hand into Hermione's as they walked. "You were brilliant," he whispered to her. "Thanks for the shoulder."

"Oh," she said, and then looked at the torn, bloody hole in his shirt. "Is it quite all right? I'd forgotten."

"Quite all right," he assured. They were behind Firenze, and Ron watched as his palomino tale swished in time with his cadence.

"Harry's doing better," Hermione remarked. "Did he need any magic from you tonight?"

"No," Ron told her. "But this wasn't too magic intensive. Just a lot of running and rope binding hexes."

"And still, there was a time not too long ago when he needed your energy just to walk," Hermione reminded him. "He's come a long way in a week."

"You've talked with him, right?" Ron asked hopefully. "Has he said anything about...you know...me?"

She turned and looked at him through the dark. "Not really."

"I know, I know. Time. It's just, well, if we're going to snuff it in the next week, I'd like to go out knowing my best mate doesn't hate my guts."

She squeezed his hand. "When is Lupin going to take Jack to the Burrow?"

"Soon," Ron told her. It was all happened so quickly. All non-essential persons were to be evacuated over the next several days.

"She's already got Crookshanks, Pig, Hedwig, and Arnold. She's collecting a menagerie." Hermione sounded amused. Ron was not. He worried about his mum, and what would happen to her if they didn't make it through.

"Bill will be here tomorrow," Ron told her in quiet tones. "With Fleur."

"And Fred and George?"

"Soon, I expect," Ron said. The twins would surely show up.

"That's five of your mother's children," Hermione said quietly. "Five of seven."

"Six," Ron said flatly. "Charlie's coming, too." Then something that hadn't occurred to him before bloomed in his mind. "What have you told your parents?"

She didn't speak for a number of steps. "Nothing," she said quietly, at last. "Just that I might not be able to contact them for a while. I don't

think they really understand what's happening. The Muggle news is...spotty. The Muggle-Worthy Excuse Committee might actually be doing too good a job."

"When was the last time you saw them?"

"Ages ago," she told him. "Ages and ages."

"Maybe you should go home for a couple of days," Ron suggested.

"There's no time," she said quickly, not even considering the idea.

"Neville and Marchbanks can watch over the potions and things."

"No," she said succinctly and then changed the subject. "Ginny's been working on some Arithmancy charts for all of us, and for the battle. There are some interesting correlations between the numbers and the prophecy. Did you know that you and I have the same heart number?"

"I don't even know what that means," Ron told her.

"Anyway, you should probably talk with her about it. It might be helpful as you finalize your strategies."

They walked along in silence for a while, and when they reached the flower pot on the old, wide tree stump, he pulled her to him. There was nothing to say, no reason to stop her other than he needed to touch her, needed to feel connected to her. She went willingly into his arms, leaned her body against his, forehead to forehead. It was just a moment, a span of breath and heartbeat, but it was enough to carry him through to the next.

When they broke apart she offered him a small smile, which he returned. They joined the others with their hands on the terracotta pot, and an instant later they were gone.

End of chapter 21

Chapter 22 – Thursday, Midnight

The antechamber off the Great Hall was large and dark and warm. Trophy cases lined the stone walls between the heavy columns that penetrated the humid space. Without windows, the room was lit by magic lamps and orbs that Moody created every so often and allowed to float against the ceiling while they worked. Ron wiped his bleary eyes, and his hand came away damp. It was warm in the antechamber; the air was heavy. Outside summer had hit with a vengeance – the Muggles were calling it a freak spot of weather, or global warming. Global warming, Ron thought with a snort, Muggles would believe anything.

"Five at the front gate," Moody said, and scooped up five chess pieces. He dropped them by the Exploding Snap cards Spellotaped together to create an archway through the wall of books that surrounded the mock up of Hogwarts. The pieces looked nervous, and clung to the small scraps of parchment they'd been given to hold, each with a different name on it. The white pawn holding Lupin's name sneezed and wiped his nose on the back of the little sign. He'd been complaining of the damp air in the antechamber all day.

"We can't put them there," Ron told Moody. "They'll be flattened."

"You'd leave the front gate unprotected?"

"Well, no," Ron admitted. "But we can't very well send five people down and expect them to hold off what's coming, now, can we?"

"Ten, then?" Moody pushed. "Twenty?"

"Anyone down there will be thrashed. They have superior numbers."

Moody eyed him, grunted. "And what do we have?"

"Homefield advantage," Ron said, scooping up the pieces at the front gate and set them back down well within Hogwarts' miniature stone walls. Moody had transfigured the model of the castle, and Ron crudely constructed the school grounds. "Anyway, we'll need Lupin in with us." He positioned Lupin's pawn inside the Great Hall next to the

Ginny's and Hermione's queens, the Harry king, and Ron's knight, who was once white, but got into it with Hagrid's rook at the Exploding Snap gate. He was now singed on one side, and his little parchment name tag was half gone.

"You can't have everyone with you," Moody told him, glaring down at the majority of pieces within the Great Hall area. "You think you can protect them by keeping them close, but you'll have your own worries to deal with – and Harry's."

"Lupin has to be in the Great Hall with the sun Ginny will create. Otherwise he's all bestial, and he won't be of any use to us."

"It'll be a full moon that night," Moody barked. "Regardless of how adept your sister has become with that spell, it'll not be like daylight for him. No, he probably won't change, but his strength will be tapped, and he may very well be out of his mind."

"Then better the Great Hall than at the front gate," Ron insisted.

Moody grunted again. "He's a pawn. Pawns are meant to be sacrificed."

"Not that one," Ron told him flatly.

"Then which?" Moody asked. "Pick. You know how chess works. You know how the game is played-"

"This isn't a game," Ron said.

"Isn't it? War is a game that's played for keeps. Living is winning, that's how it works. Pick your pawns," Moody insisted. "Who will you sacrifice?"

"No one," Ron said. "I won't."

"Then how will you capture their king?" Moody gestured to the black king with Voldemort's name tied around his neck. The piece had refused to hold the nametag, and had broken down in tears when Ron had forced it on him. "How will you get your king into position?"

Everything costs, pimple. And now there's no price too high. Not in this game. Pick your pawns."

"No!"

"Do it!"

"No!"

"Protect your king, but get him into position! Who's going to get him there? Who'll be the ones to get him through the Dark Lord's ranks? Who will battle the werewolves and infiri and the rest of them? Who will duel with the Death Eaters? Someone's got to, pimple! Someone's got to be sacrificed!"

"Then let it be me!" Ron yelled, and slammed his own piece down at the front gate. His knight cried out and shook behind what was left of his sign. It wasn't a sacrifice made lightly or flippantly, but it was the only one Ron was willing to make.

"Just you?" Moody asked. "Against them all?" He picked up the little knight, who cowered deeper into his fist. "It can't be you, though, can it? It's up to you to protect your king. You're his Second. You're his Smisurato." He placed Ron's knight down beside Harry. The two pieces looked at each other, the knight blew his nose, and then stared back up at Moody. "You're the one who has to keep him safe, pimple. You're the one who has to make sure he's got the power to finish the job. You've got your role, and so do the rest of us."

Moody picked up Lupin's piece, and his own, and placed them down at the front gate again. And then he added Shacklebolt and Hagrid and Charlie and Bill. "Five at the front gate to take down as many as possible. Then we retreat to reinforce those waiting at the main door." He nudged the castle McGonagall forward to stand next to bishop Neville, knight Firenze, the twins as pawn, and the queens.

Ron snatched up Hermione and set her back inside the Great Hall.

"Think it through, pimple. If something happens, it'll be better if you're apart."

"Never," Ron swore.

"If she goes down, you still have your king to protect. Harry's all that matters at this point. It's got to be Harry and the Dark Lord in the end, and you've got to see him there."

"You said I had to Love her, and that was all that mattered! And I do! I bloody well do love her, and I won't sacrifice her! Not even for Harry! Not even to defeat Voldemort!"

Moody's eyes narrowed on Ron. "You've got some nerve saying that name to me."

"I suppose I've got some nerve, then," Ron told him. "Hermione's with us. She's our healer. She's been training-"

"She'll help the others."

Ron shook his head. "No!" Then he picked up Ginny and Neville and Lupin and placed them all back inside the Great Hall. "Firenze can help at the front gate. And he's fast. When you all retreat he'll make it back safely to the castle for sure, but Hagrid, he's good for close combat, thumping people over the head and the like, but his magic's not always with him."

"Fine, then. Firenze at the front gate." Moody picked up the queens and deposited them once again next to the front door, and Dedalus Diggle's pawn.

"They won't agree to that. Ginny won't leave Harry," Ron told him.

"They'll do as they're told!" Moody insisted.

"Who? Hermione and Ginny? Have you even met them?"

Moody got in his face. "This is war, and they're the soldiers. They'll do as commanded!"

Ron grabbed the pieces up. "They're with me!"

"And what happens to them when you go down?" Moody demanded. "How distracted do you think your girl will be when she sees you take a 'Die' to the chest? Enough to get hit herself? Is that what you want for her?"

Ron threw the pieces at Moody, and stormed out of the antechamber. Fury boiled in his belly, clouding everything behind the buzz in his head and the stampede of his heart. He blew through the Great Hall, heard Moody call after him in a wave of swears, but Ron didn't look back. He needed air. He needed space. He headed out of the castle, through the stone circle, and out onto the grounds. He didn't care about the heat any longer, or the dangers that might lurk out in the open like that. He wanted to kick something, to hit until someone cried. He wanted to run, and that's what he did, all the way to the lake. His chest burned, his legs pumped, the hot breeze combed through his hair until he ran out of ground by the water's edge and had to stop. Sweat ran in rivulets down his face.

He'd said good-bye to his mother that morning, as had the twins and Charlie and Bill. She even cried when Fleur hugged her and kissed her cheeks. It had been hard watching her go, with little Jack in her arms. Ron couldn't keep the question of whether he'd see either of them again from his mind.

Mrs. Figg had gone too, along with the other non-combatants with the Order. The house elves were given the option, per Hermione's insistence, but none of them left. She just didn't understand that the creatures had no where else to go. Ron stared out over the black, smooth lake, and thought he knew how that must feel. There was no where on Earth that he and Harry and the rest of them could run to. The Fates would have their destiny in just a matter of days.

It wasn't until then that he heard Hermione behind him. He turned to see her running toward him. She slowed as she got nearer, and when she finally reached him he took her wrist and pulled her close enough to kiss. He pressed his lips hotly against hers, dug his fingers through her fuzzy hair. Her arms went around his middle as she kissed him back. How could he sacrifice her? What was the point of winning if she didn't survive?

He pulled away from her, watched the hollow of her collar bone as she tried to regain her breath. "I want you to go to my mother's," he told her. His lips were moist, and the breeze tickled across them. "I want you to stay there until this is all done."

"You know I can't do that," she said with a heavy sigh.

"I know," he told her. But it didn't keep him from wanting it.

"Everything all right?" Harry asked, coming in beside them. Ron hadn't even noticed Harry had followed him out, too.

"Moody's a git."

Harry smirked. "That's what got you riled up? You passed by a table full of roast, you know. "Real meat. When was the last time we had that?"

Ron frowned. "Not hungry, I guess."

"It must be serious," Harry quipped, only half-joking.

"What is it?" Hermione prompted.

He looked deep into her big, brown eyes. How had he known her for so many years and not noticed how breathtaking she was? Even now as her hair was beginning to grow out, and it was all fluffy and untamed, she looked like...

"You're a goddess," he told her.

"What?" She turned a little red and threw a nervous grin at Harry.

He shook his head. He didn't want to talk about it. And he didn't have to. In the next moment the Clock Tower bell began to gong. Once, twice, three times. All of them looked that way, and a quiet: "Peeves?" eked hopefully out of Harry. But then two more gongs followed a short break, and then the single told them that it was no prank. Marchbanks had given the warning. They were under attack.

"It's too soon!" Harry insisted as they broke into a sprint. "We've got three more days!"

"Where's Ginny?" Hermione called. "She'll be frantic looking for you, Harry!"

"Great Hall!" Harry yelled out, and they all headed in that direction.

Just inside the front doors though, at the bottom of the grand staircase, they all came to a skidding halt. A throng of Order members stood surrounding a figure Ron never thought he'd see again. Harry drew his wand and got out, "Avad-" before Ron Stupified him. He couldn't let Harry kill Snape, at least not until they knew why he was there.

As soon as the commotion died down, Snape was taken bound down into the dungeons to the nearest classroom (which happened to be his old Potions room). Ginny woke Harry, who promptly turned and punched Ron in the face.

"That felt good," Harry said, holding his fist.

Ron, hands full of his bloody nose, felt differently. Hermione righted him, though, and he wiped his face on his t-shirt.

"Where is he?" Harry demanded. "I'm going to kill him."

"First we should know why he's come," Hermione said pragmatically. "He arrived under a white hat."

"It's a trick!" he shouted, pouncing at her. "It's Snape!"

Hermione took a shocked step back, and Ron stepped between them. "Easy mate. We're all on your side."

"You knocked me out!" Harry insisted.

"And you broke my nose!" Ron countered.

"Yeah," said Harry, darkly. "Finally." He looked as if he'd like to do it again.

"Let's keep our heads," Ginny said flatly. "Snape's here. Let's see what he has to say for himself."

"He killed Dumbledore!" Harry insisted.

"So you're going to hit me in the face, now are you?" Ginny asked and gave him a glare that said she knew he wouldn't dare.

Harry turned with his hands on his hips and Ron watched as he forced himself under control. "It's just Snape?" Harry asked. He spit the name out. "He came alone?"

"Looks that way," Ron told him.

Harry glared at him, and then Hermione. His expression softened a little when he turned to Ginny. "Fine, then. But when you're done with him, he's mine."

Ginny didn't argue, though Ron was sorely tempted to. Harry wasn't joking around, and he wasn't exaggerating. He really did mean to kill Snape. Ron followed them down to the dungeons, feeling very unsettled.

When they went into the Potions classroom McGonagall was already there snorting her displeasure. Shacklebolt and Moody had Snape under wand, and tied to an arm chair. Lupin sat passively by as Snape glared at nothing. The rest of the Order had gone back to their preparations now that the threat was contained. Harry stayed close to the door, leaning against the stone wall with his arms and legs crossed. Ginny left him there, and took a stool near the front of the class, as did Hermione.

"You've got our attention," Ron told Snape from the back of the room. He didn't want to be too far from Harry. "Go on, then. What do you want?"

Snape's eyes glazed over a little, and he seemed irritated that he had to address Ron at all. Then his dark eyes slipped over to the unmade bed. "Love what you've done with the place."

"Thanks," Ron quipped. "And you're looking well. I see the Death Eaters are treating you right." There was no question that Snape was as pale as ever, or his hair as long and greasy as Ron remembered, but there was a hollowness in his cheeks that hadn't been there before, and it made his hooked nose even more pronounced, his dark eyes more beady, his expression more pinched. His dark, tattered clothing hung loosely on his bony frame. He looked like a beaten dog - an ugly, beaten dog. But, it was Snape's missing left arm to which Ron was referring. It looked as if it had been severed just below the elbow, though with all his robes it was hard to tell.

Snape's eyes narrowed. He studied Ron now as if he'd not really seen him before.

"What do you want, Snape? Certainly you didn't stop by for a chat about our decorating choices."

Snape turned his attention on Harry, who was drawn about as tight as a bowstring. "I've information. Crucial information."

"We're listening," Ginny said stiffly.

Snape's gaze narrowed on her for half a second, and then flew back to Harry. "I see you've kept your little friends close."

Harry didn't say anything – didn't even breathe, from what Ron could see. Ron took a step forward. "We're waiting," he said.

"You are aware, no doubt, that there has been a marked change in the type of magic the...other side...is practicing?" Snape turned to Ron. "Surely even you've noticed." Ron didn't rise to the bait. He waited like the rest of them for Snape to continue. It didn't take long.

"It's not a new type of magic," Snape told them. "It's old. It's Shared Magic. The Dark Lord can Bundle."

Lupin and Moody both wheezed their shock, McGonagall gasped.
"Severus, you can't...is this true?"

"Give me Veritaserum if my honesty is in doubt."

"My thoughts, exactly," said Moody, and he gave Lupin a terse nod before he disappeared out the door.

"Severus," McGonagall said, in a reasonable tone. "Why are you here?"

"I thought that was obvious." What was obvious, Ron thought, was that Snape hated them all. He even snapped at McGonagall with disgust.

"You can't expect us to believe you want to help," McGonagall continued. "Not after what you've done."

"I did what had to be done," Snape said, with no apology in his voice. "As I do now. Nothing matters beyond the Dark Lord's defeat. You know it, Minerva, as well as I do. As well as Dumbledore did."

"You dare say that name!" Harry leapt forward, shocked in to action.

"Easy, Harry," Lupin warned.

"Still have a hot head, I see," Snape sneered. "Just like your father."

Harry raised his wand, and Ron had to step in the way. "Move!" Harry commanded.

"You can't," Ron told him. "Don't let him goad you."

"Why can't I?" Harry yelled. "Let me finish him now! The same way he did Dumbledore!"

"Harry," Ron said under his breath and taking a step toward him. "You're the good guy."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Harry demanded.

Ron stepped in even closer. These words were only for Harry. "It means that you can't kill someone who's unarmed and tied to a chair just because you hate him."

Anguish twisted Harry's face, tears of frustration and hatred filled his eyes, his whole body trembled with tension. His wand didn't lower. Moody came in while Harry still stood like that, and the old wizard paused for a moment to take in the scene. It didn't faze Moody, though. He continued to the professor's desk, pulled out a beaker, and poured a thick, green liquid into it.

"From your personal stock," Moody said to Snape with his gargoyle grin. "So we know it'll be strong enough."

Snape refused to look at him. With his arms bound, Moody had to hold the glass, but Snape drained every last drop, closed his eyes, and tilted his head back. They all waited for the potion to take effect.

Ron was more worried about Harry at the moment, though. He began to breathe again as his friend finally lowered his wand, turned and walked out the door. Hermione glanced at him over her shoulder and nodded to Ron silently encouraging him to follow.

He found Harry on the Grand Stairs, sitting with his head in his hands.

"Don't say anything," Harry told him.

"Right," Ron muttered, and dropped down on the steps next to him.

"I would give anything to be you right now," Harry said in a low, quiet voice. "Or anyone else, really. Anyone but Harry Potter."

Ron couldn't really blame him. It had to be difficult living up to the name and the legacy; to be the Chosen One, marked from birth – well, almost birth. Harry carried a lot of responsibility, and a lot of guilt. Ron hated to see what it was doing to him.

"Snape deserves to die."

Ron couldn't argue with that, either. "The thing is," Ron said, "you don't deserve to kill him."

Harry balked. "I don't? I deserve it above anyone else! It should be my right!"

"Killing someone – it's not an honor, Harry. It's not something to be earned. It's a horrible, brutal act and it never leaves you. It creates a darkness in your soul that will never die." Ron had thought he'd killed Draco once. Harry met his eyes, and Ron continued. "You've seen the change in Ginny, I know you have. And she killed that Death Eater in self-defense."

Harry dropped his gaze to his hands. "She'd already known darkness," he said. "She's known true hate because of Tom Riddle. She was only eleven when he did that to her."

Ron didn't know what to say. He remembered Ginny at eleven; she'd been another girl entirely.

"I'm not like you," Harry said. "I wish I was. I wish I could look at Snape and not see Dumbledore's last expression; I wish I could look at my girl and not know all the horrible, disgusting things Riddle did to her. I wish..." Harry shook his head, and then dropped it back into his hands. "But I do see the instant Dumbledore was murdered in Snape's face, and I do know what happened to Ginny, and I didn't do anything to stop either of them! I couldn't protect them then, and I can't protect any of you now!"

"It's not your job to protect us, Harry, it's our job to protect you."

"No. You're in this because of me. If you'd never met me-"

"I'd be right here, anyway. In case you hadn't noticed, my whole family is here. My parents were Order members before you and I were friends."

"Your parents joined the Order because of what happened to Ginny. And she ended up with that diary because of my connection to your family."

Again, Ron was stunned into silence. He didn't doubt Harry had his facts right. He just was shocked that he never knew this, that he'd never thought to ask.

"And Hermione," Harry continued, looking at Ron from the corner of his eye. "She'd be home in Kent with her wonderfully oblivious Muggle parents right about now. She'd be safe. Your dad would be alive."

"Maybe," Ron conceded. "Maybe the world would've been better if we hadn't been mates. But then you'd be alone here, talking to yourself, facing Voldemort on your own, and...and we never would've been mates. Or, maybe Hermione and I never would've met – Fated or not, Ginny would be dead without you saving her from Tom Riddle – there's nothing that says Lucius Malfoy wouldn't have dropped that diary into her pail even if you hadn't been with us that day. Or, maybe Voldemort would've come into power years ago if we hadn't become friends, and Hermione and I hadn't helped you get through to the Sorcerer's Stone, and you would've had to face him with all his power as a corporeal being as a first year – long before you'd ever heard the word Horcrux. Maybe, Harry...maybe things happen for a reason. Maybe the Fates had the three of us friends, and all the rest of it, too, so that you'd be the person you are now sitting on this step, so that you can defeat Voldemort this time. And maybe the Fates linked me and Hermione not only to help you defeat Voldemort, but to remind you that we're fighting for good. You've got friends, Harry. The best of the best. We'd do anything for you – even Stupify you. Even sneak out without telling you. And, I'm not saying it's right or wrong, or that I wouldn't do things differently if I had a chance to do them over – especially with what happened to Ginny - but I am saying that you've got friends. People who are completely loyal to you. And he doesn't. The Fates want us to win. They've given us the prophecies, they've given us Love, they've given us time to grow up and come into our own so that we can understand what's at stake. Maybe they knew you weren't ready at a year old to face Voldemort, and that's why they

left you with your scar; so you'd remember what they've given you, so you wouldn't take it for granted."

Harry didn't say anything. He just sat there and stared at his shoes.

"Or, maybe they didn't," Ron added with a shrug. "All I know is that we're here now, and we are mates, and the world is what it is. Killing Snape isn't going to change that. He's not important enough. But killing him will change you."

Harry stared at him for a moment from the corner of his eye, studied him. "You took the nonesuch seed, didn't you? I thought you were going to save it."

"For Hermione? It would be wasted on her," Ron quipped lightly. Ron hadn't thought of that seed in months. It was funny that Harry would assume.

Harry stared at him for another moment, and then gave an amused snort. "You're bloody mad. You know that, don't you?"

"Just enough to make me the right man for the job," Ron told him, echoing Harry's words to the Minister of Magic. Harry's brows rose at this.

Ron cleared his throat. "Look, we should get back down there and see what Snape will cough up under the influence."

"You go," Harry told him. "Find me if he says anything important."

"Where will you be?"

Harry shrugged and pushed himself to his feet. "With my thoughts," he said. "I need to sort through some things."

When Ron made it back to Potions, Snape was spouting a flood of insults, most of which were aimed at Lupin, but several "know-it-all mudblood's," made it out in the few seconds it took Ron to walk in, and those were undoubtedly meant for Hermione. Had he not been drooling on himself, Ron would've drawn his wand. But, as he was, it was plain Snape was not in control anything he was spouting. Ron

took a seat next to Hermione, who gave him a weary smile of acknowledgement.

"Let's go back to what you were saying, shall we?" Lupin asked, as if they were having a pleasant conversation. "About the Horcruxes. You said we'd gotten it wrong, yes?"

"Of course you got it wrong, you disgusting half-breed! You said there's a sixth Horcrux!"

"Voldemort didn't make six?" Lupin asked.

Snape snarled, rolled his eyes. "Yes, yes, he made six. Six, six, six. So that with the soul in his body, there would be seven. He's a genius. The Dark Lord knew of the magical power of seven. Six Horcruxes plus the one left inside."

"Then what happened to the sixth Horcrux?" Lupin asked.

Snape glared at him in disdain. "Honestly? You can't figure it out? James would've had it by now, Remus. Or certainly Sirius. You pale by their comparison."

"I always did," Lupin said lightly. "Tell us about the sixth Horcrux."

Snape's eyes rolled to the back of his head, and for a moment Ron thought he was passing out. But then he gave an exaggerated sigh and said: "Six plus one. The one died the night the Potter brat survived. That left only the six Horcruxes. See how the math is so clean, Remus? See the beauty in Arithmancy? Of the six, one was used to bring the Dark Lord back into his new body. The snake still lives, yes, but she no longer holds the Dark Lord's soul. From the moment he returned to a body, there have only been five Horcruxes. Surely you noticed how he looked that night in the graveyard, Potter!" He spit the name like a curse. "Surely that pathetic, weak mind of yours was able to deduce why his features were so...snake-like! Did you think that was coincidence? Did you think that was normal? Or perhaps you think it was the evil in him coming out? SNAKES ARE NOT EVIL!"

Ron turned around, but Harry wasn't in the room. Snape was out of his mind.

"So, there are no more?" Ginny asked in a halting voice.

Snape's black eyes shot to her. He licked the side of his mouth, already wet with uncontrolled saliva. "No more!" His eyes bore into hers, and Ron thought he sensed a smile curling at the corner of Snape's thin mouth. "Miss your daddy, little girl?" A line of spit dripped slowly from the side of his mouth and hung for a moment before it broke off and joined the wet front of his shirt.

To Ginny's credit, she didn't flinch. "Draco's weak. He's a coward," Ginny said defiantly. "You and I both know that was never his magic that murdered my father."

Snape's eyes widened the smallest amount, but Ron could see he was surprised. "You've figured that out, then?" Snape asked, in a monotone. "Then, tell me, if you can, who killed your blood-traitor father? Who stopped his heart in his chest with a single...word."

Ginny was so pale she looked grey. She licked her lips. "Voldemort."

Snape flinched but barely moved, barely spoke when he whispered, "Do not say that name to me."

"Is she right?" Moody demanded as he leaned in close to Snape, his magic eye going wild over its subject. "Was it You-Know-Who?"

Snape looked from Ginny to Moody, and then back to Ginny again. "After a fashion," he reluctantly allowed. "Malfoy, the younger, of course said the release. I'm sure you all witnessed it. I was told it was...something of a spectacle." The right side of his mouth gave the smallest snarl. Or was that a smile? "The magic wasn't his, of course. That kind of power..." For a moment Snape's eyes glazed over. "You have no appreciation for true genius."

"How did Malfoy do it, then?" Moody demanded.

Snape sized Moody up, and then looked past him as if he weren't even there. "As I said, the Dark Lord has mastered Shared Magic. He has learned how to Bind."

Lupin's face drew even tighter. "But surely," he said, "You-Know-Who would not be so reckless as that. Bound Magic? Truly?"

"Limited," Snape said. "But I assure you, he can Bind. He's given each of his followers one Charge."

"And how many different spells?" Hermione asked. All eyes in the room landed on her.

Snape seemed startled that she knew to ask. "Three," he said tersely.

"The three Unforgivables," Hermione said confidently. "'Obey', 'Pain', 'Die'."

Snape nodded begrudgingly.

"What are the counter curses?" Moody demanded.

"The counter curse to 'Die'? You must be joking," Snape said smugly. "You would be dead before you ever heard the word."

"No spell is uncounterable," Hermione told him.

"Really?" Snape sounded amused. His lip curled, and a line of moisture leaked out the corner. "Tell me the counter to The Killing Curse. Or The Cruciatus."

"Just because I don't know them doesn't mean they don't exist. Rule number seventeen in the Basic Laws of Magic states: 'No magic exists in a vacuum. Each part has a reasonable, weighted counterpart.' Therefore-"

"Oh shut up, you filthy little mudblood! No one cares that you can memorize useless bits of minutia!"

"Actually, I care," Lupin said. "Because she's right. Severus, do you know the counter curses?"

"You don't need counter curses," Snape said, and their surprise gave him a moment of satisfaction. "It's a Bound Spell," Snape told them. "All you need is-

"And Unbinding Amulet," Hermione said, almost to herself. And then she jumped up from her chair. "But protective amulets – specifically Unbinding Amulets - are incredibly powerful and complex protective magical items! Even if we knew the correct incantations – even if we had the power and skill – it would take weeks of work to Weave the kind of magic it would take to create one amulet, let alone enough for the Order! Wouldn't it?"

Snape didn't move, didn't flinch or gloat. He was almost calm, tied to the chair.

"This is why you've come," Lupin said to him. "You've come to help us make the amulets. You know the incantations."

Through narrowed eyes Snape glared at him as if he resented that Lupin had guessed correctly, but he didn't contradict the accusation.

"We know he's coming Thursday, midnight. Is there enough time?" Hermione asked, and was rewarded by a look of astonishment on her former professor's face.

Darkness would descend Thursday, midnight. Odd really, Ron decided, because Thursday didn't really feel like a day one would battle. Maybe a Monday, or a Friday. But Ginny had applied her Arithmancy and drawn up a series of complicated charts and diagrams, and she seemed to feel that the numbers agreed with the full moon that night, and the alignment of Mars and Neptune (Hermione had done the Astronomy charts to coincide with Ginny's work), that the Universe was almost begging for something monumental to happen. And Thursday was two weeks to the day from the destruction of the last Horcrux - it was hard to get around that bit.

So, Thursday it was.

"How could you possibly know?" Snape asked, his voice low and quiet.

"Is three days enough time?" Hermione asked, and her voice went a little shrill. Ron made a mental note to see that Hermione got some sleep. "There are sixty of us! Can we make enough?"

"If we start now," Snape said, glaring at her, his lip curled into a snarl. "There should be enough time to make seven."

"We?" Ginny challenged.

"Unless you can Weave, then yes, we." Snape glared at Moody. "I trust you can Weave. There will, of course, need to be two of us."

Moody nodded, and gave a grunt.

"Untie him." This command came from behind Ron, from a voice he barely recognized as being Harry's. He had no idea how long Harry had been there at the door. "Give him what he needs, but Moody, he's your responsibility. If he makes even the slightest move toward treachery, blast him into the next world."

Harry and Ginny disappeared after that, and Ron reckoned they just needed a bit of time alone. He wished he could take that same time with Hermione, but she seemed endlessly busy – as were they all, really.

After a wasted hour in the antechamber where Ron finally decided to put away his chess pieces before they broke up from the anxiety, Ron returned to Potions. Hermione and Neville were hunched over a table separating out ingredients and artifacts for the amulets. Moody and Snape stood at the professor's desk bent over a large white candle, wands drawn, and mouths moving. They were mumbling so Ron wasn't able to understand their incantation, but that hardly mattered. It was clear they were Weaving. Ron stood there in the doorway for a while, watching them. They'd done it before, he could tell. Probably

not that particular spell, or together, but both had certainly Weaved at one time or another.

When Hermione noticed him at the door, she gave him a smile and he climbed on to the stool beside her. She was stuffing bits of this and that into small cinched pockets. "I thought amulets were necklaces," Ron said quietly.

"I thought so, too," Neville offered. He seemed happy to have that small connection.

"Amulets can be anything that can be charmed and transported on the body," Hermione told them.

Neville glanced almost nervously over his shoulder. "Do...do you think they can hear us?"

In the time Ron and Harry had grown into men, Neville had, as well. He was less gawky, than he'd been in his youth, Ron thought, but he was far from handsome. His teeth were still too large, his cheeks too rounded, his nose too bulbous; but still, Ron reckoned he was good enough for most girls. After all, Ron was no looker either, but he'd never heard Hermione complain. In fact, he'd be shocked if she did. Girls weren't like blokes that way. Of course, Neville didn't have a girl, so far as Ron knew, and Ron had Hermione because of the Fates...

"Ron? You all right? You have the most peculiar expression on your face." Hermione was smirking quizzically at him.

"So, why haven't I heard of Bound Magic?" Ron asked, changing the subject.

"Because you never paid attention in History of Magic, and it wasn't on the tests, so you never bothered to read my notes over it. Of course, Binns only spent about ten minutes on it because Binding is more or less considered archaic. It's a type of Shared Magic – as old as Love magic," Hermione explained. "And it's difficult. You have to be very powerful, very accomplished, to be able to Bind."

"It's where a wizard casts a spell and then freezes it, right?" asked Neville. "And then he can give it to someone else to Release with a password. Gran told me fairy stories about wizards who Bound their spells. But who believes fairy stories?"

"The thing is," Hermione continued, "that the magic's power is based on the initial conjurer's abilities. So, if it's Voldemort who's handing out the spells, it's essentially his power that we're dealing with." She looked down at the small bag in her hand. "Oh, Ron...your father thought he was dealing with Draco. He thought a Muffle Hex would be enough."

"But..." Ron had to shake his head to get the memory of his mum's scream, out of his head. "But why didn't he think of that? I thought the Ministry was supposed to be good at that kind of stuff."

Hermione shrugged. "All I can say is that Bound Magic, like all Shared Magic, it's something that we don't do now. Moody talked about contamination as a reason why it fell out of practice, but I can tell you from my own experience that it's, well, not something I'd ever want to do again."

"It's not so bad," Ron told her.

"For you, maybe. It took me days to recover, and my mind was all mushy..."

"You Shared Magic?" Neville asked, in awe. "With who?"

"Harry," Hermione told him. "And only the once. Ron does it all the time. He's quite good at it."

"Yeah, well..." Ron said modestly.

"Blimey!" Neville said, excited. "Do you expect you'll be doing it when...You-Know-Who attacks?" Poor Neville looked like he wanted to say the name, but he just couldn't get it to come out.

"They've been practicing for ages now," Hermione said proudly, "for that very reason."

Neville's excited face darkened. "Do you suppose...it'll be like at the Ministry? That he'll chase us?"

Ron never forgot it was Neville and Luna who were there with them at the Ministry, the only two to respond when the DA was called into action. He did underestimate the effect that episode had on his other schoolmates, though. Ron had had Harry and Ginny and Hermione to talk to about what had happened. But who had Neville turned to? Certainly not his Gran.

"I'm sure it'll be different this time," Hermione told him. "We have a lot more people on our side, and we've got a plan going in – don't we, Ron?" Her brown eyes looked pleadingly at his.

"Oh, sure. And it'll be good, too. Snape's got inside information, see," Ron assured.

"I don't mind the fighting," Neville said, staring at the herbs squeezed between his finger and thumb. "And I don't mind getting hit. It's just the chasing...it's scary..." He nodded a little, and went back to stuffing the bags.

Ron cleared his throat, and followed Neville's glance over to Snape and Moody. There was a shimmering net of magic hovering above the flickering candle flame. It sparked as it grew more and more solid. Moody seemed lost in a trance, but Snape's keen eyes looked fascinated with the way the spell was materializing. Snape's blue magic blended with Moody's green.

The ability to Weave was a rare skill, and far beyond anything ever taught at Hogwarts. Wizards with exceptional ability had to apprentice for years with a wizard mentor to learn how to Weave their magic successfully with another's, but Ron had also heard that there were some in the Ministry that could weave, like the Unspeakables. And the Obliviators. Moody had most likely learned it through the Ministry. But where had Snape?

"You know, it's odd," Hermione said, her head cocked to one side. "Weaving is also a form of Shared Magic – though a wizard doesn't

take another wizard's magic inside himself. It's more the Weaving of two magics through and into an object. But, Weaving isn't really a taboo like Bound Magic."

"Well, we need Weavers, don't we? Who else would enchant the portraits? And certainly that's how we got the Sorting Hat," Ron said.

"You're forgetting the Sorting Hats terribly old. It belonged to Godric Gryffindor."

"You think he Weaved it?" Neville asked.

"It's possible, I reckon. He was supposed to have been a very powerful wizard. Of course he'd need someone else to help-"

"Now, Granger!" Snape said excitedly, "bring the first amulet!" She hopped off her chair and hurried over with the red velvet bag. Moody was still lost in his incantation; Snape continued with his terse instruction. "When he begins the cycle again, drop the satchel over the Weave. Be sure to get your hand out of the way, Granger, and avert your eyes. We'd hate to add any fresh scars."

She positioned the bag and waited.

Ron swallowed. He'd never seen an item enchanted before. Not with a Weave, at any rate.

"Now!" Snape yelled, and Hermione let go and quickly turned away. There was a brilliant white light, a sort of silent mini-explosion. When the bag hit the candle flame, the fire and candle - as one - disappeared. The amulet thudded lightly to the table.

"It worked," Neville said, awestruck. "That was brilliant, that was!"

Moody took a step back and blinked a couple of times with his good eye. "Think I'll sit a spell," he said, and then limped over to one of the stools. "Forgot how much energy that takes."

"Yes," Snape said, as he stared at Mad-Eye. Then he turned on Hermione. "Have you finished with the other amulets?"

"I've – no. I've still got to collect something for Ron's and Lupin's. But I've got the rest."

"No matter," Moody said. "It'll take another couple of hours to get the next one made. We won't be ready for the last two until tomorrow." He grunted as he twisted his metal leg off. "I could use a Firewhiskey." Ron stared down at the dark school grounds from behind the crenellations of the Astronomy Tower. The night sky was blanketed with stars and the biggest, orangest moon he'd ever seen floated ominously over the Forbidden Forest. The heat was bearable up there thanks to the strong south wind that played through Ron's hair and robes, drying the sweat on his face and neck. He touched the green amulet that rested against his chest.

"Are you scared?" Hermione's voice was quiet beside him, and half of it was carried away on the heavy breeze.

"No," he told her, truthfully. He felt curiously calm. He looked at her, though, and was certain she wasn't sharing his serenity. "This is it," he told her. "Everything in our lives has led to this moment. It's finally here, and it's...this is how it's supposed to be."

She stared into his eyes for a moment. The little light that was coming through the tower door cast a stark shadow from the red-orange glow of the moon on her face. It had been a long time since he'd seen her in Hogwarts robes. Ron thought she'd never looked so lovely.

It had been short days followed by even shorter nights since Snape's arrival, but this day, Thursday, seemed to have lasted a lifetime. The preparations were finished. The castle sealed. The ghosts had reported excitedly on an hourly basis that nothing had changed. At noon Hermione led Ron to the empty Ravenclaw Tower's second year boy's dorm, and they'd made love in the heat of the sun through the window. He'd watched every bit of her as she moved with him, and afterwards she stared into his face as if to memorize him. With all the emotions churning inside, it had been difficult to find his release, and he wasn't sure that he'd been able to give her hers.

That was hours ago, now, and Ron wished for that time back, to be able to make love to her just once more.

Behind them on the Tower's rampart, Harry and Ginny were whispering, and then came the distinct wet smacks of kisses exchanged. Ron wondered if Hermione wanted to be kissed, but her pensive profile didn't hint that she did. She clutched the blue amulet tied around her neck as she stared out over the lake. Even this late, because of this moon, it looked as if it were on fire.

The bell began to toll, and beside him, Hermione jumped. Ron looked to the Clock Tower. Eleven thirty-two. Then he scanned out, past the deserted village of Hogsmeade, and into the valley beyond. There was something there, something dark. Something moving.

Ginny saw it, too. She came up on Ron's other side, touched his arm, laid her cheek against it. "Guard him," she said in a quiet, but hard voice. "Protect him."

"With my life."

Her eyes lifted to him, and for a split second Ron felt an echo of what she'd looked like her first night at Hogwarts, full of the excitement and joy and tremendous relief. She'd been a little girl who'd finally made it to the one place she'd spent her whole life wishing to be. When he blinked it was hard to reconcile the witch who stood beside him with that girl he'd called sister all those years ago. Ginny was strong. She was brave. She was amazing. She should've been the Smisurato. She would've been brilliant.

The bell sounded again, and Ron turned to search the night. There was even more movement behind them, through the mountain pass from the west. So they were to be surrounded. It wasn't anything he hadn't already anticipated. "Harry," he said. "Plan A, then. And we should go downstairs. The Death Eaters won't wait for the rest." No, they would most certainly sweep in ahead of the undead, and leave them the leftovers.

"Dobby!" Harry called. An instant later the house elf appeared.

"Yes, Harry Potter, sir!" The little creature wore a crude armor over his knitted britches made of a skillet and a cookie sheet tied together with kitchen twine and belted around his waist. If the Death Eaters came armed with eggs and scones, Dobby would certainly be ready.

"It's Plan A. Please alert the ghosts and portraits, and speak to Moody personally. I'll be down in a moment." Harry seemed calm, Ron saw. And perhaps a little sad.

"Yes, sir! Good luck, Harry Potter, sir!" And Dobby disappeared.

Harry turned then, grabbed Hermione, and hugged her fiercely. She buried her face in his neck. Ron turned away, to give them their good-bye.

And then, to the south he saw the dark horizon bubble like blood in a cauldron. Plan A was a good plan. It would work well. There was no Plan B.

Ron felt a small hand slide into his. "You've been a good brother," Ginny whispered.

"Only the best," Ron told her. This earned him a snort of humor. "And you've been a brilliant sister."

"Right, then." Harry was behind them, and he took Ginny by the hand and led her down the Tower.

Hermione stood alone by the rampart, and stared glassy-eyed up at the sky. She looked a little lost. Ron stepped up behind her and wrapped his arms around her, kissed her temple. She inhaled deeply. "You protect him, Ron Weasley," she said in a broken voice. "But you follow the plan. You hear me? Follow that bloody plan of yours!"

"I will," he told her.

"Someone we know is going to die tonight," she whispered.

"Yes," he said. Probably many someones.

"Please, please, Ron. Please don't let it be you."

"I won't," he said.

They stood quietly for a little while longer as the darkness slowly approached.

The Great Hall was dark and hot, and that, combined with the sight of sixty or so Harrys made Ron a little motion sick. Harry came up beside him holding a stone flask. "Where've you been?"

Ron downed the contents, and gagged at the flavor. Second year came back to him in a flash, only that time he'd turned into Crabbe. Or had he been Goyle? Ron suspected they would've tasted equally bad. He handed the flask off, and waited as his flesh and bone and hair molted. His hands became Harry's. Ginger fringe turned dark. Another Harry came up behind him and handed him a set of glasses.

"Chudley Cannons," said another Harry behind him, and Ron responded with the agreed, "Licorice wands."

Harry looked relieved. "If I was at all narcissistic I'd be having a jolly good time right about now. Instead I feel as if I've just come out the wrong end of a funhouse."

"Yeah, it's off-putting," Ron quipped. "I don't think I've ever been so ugly."

Harry jabbed him with his wand. "Ready to make a go of this?"

"Been ready for ages," Ron said lightly. "Been waiting on you."

Harry smiled, and then looked away. It had to be odd, Ron thought, to look your best friend in the eye and see yourself. Harry grabbed his shoulder though, and gave him a little shake. Then, he raised his wand at the ceiling, and shot a trio of yellow sparks into the air. The room parted, and the Harrys melted back into the walls. All save for one. Moody. As Harry's Seventh he stood alone in the center of the room.

The clock tower began to chime the hour with a tremendous GONG.

Ron reached out with his magic and found Hermione. He couldn't tell where she was, but she gave him a little nudge back, and he withdrew content. The room was completely silent except for the thundering GONG. GONG.

The furniture had been removed. GONG.

The magic ceiling was off, and the vaults above were dark and empty. GONG.

Sweat dripped down the back of Ron's neck, down the middle of his spine. GONG.

His heart started to pound. GONG.

Ron lifted his amulet to his lips. GONG.

GONG. GONG. GONG. GONG...

And nothing happened. It was Thursday, midnight. Where was Darkness? And why hadn't it descended? Moody had suggested that it might take some time for the Death Eaters to break the anti-Apparation and other protective charms on the castle. Rape, Lupin had called it.

"Plan A is brilliant," Harry whispered beside him. "I hope it keeps working this smoothly."

"They'll come," Ron told him.

"I'd rather they didn't, if it's all the same to you."

"Oh, it's all the same to me."

Plan A had everyone in one room. No one out guarding save for the ghosts and portraits who were more look-outs than anything else. Peeves had been told he had free-reign over anyone in a hood. Ron had never seen the poltergeist so gleeful.

"Don't suppose they'll bring tea, do you?" Ron asked. "I could go for a biscuit."

"How can you possibly think of food at a time like this?" Harry asked.

"It's my stomach that's thinking. I'm just giving it voice."

A deafening CRACK! reverberated through the room, and its contents dropped low, covered their ears. In the next instant a hundred robed figures appeared. And, for a long heartbeat no one moved. Several of the Death Eaters threw off their masks, as if they couldn't believe the dozens of Harrys staring back at them. They hesitated, as Ron knew they would. Voldemort would want to dispose of Harry himself, and no doubt had ordered that he was to be left alive, if not unscathed.

But the Harrys were under no such orders, and with their targets wide open, they attacked. The Death Eater contingent was instantly cut in half. Ginny's brilliant sun was cast at the ceiling. The room was suddenly aglow in a rich, golden light as screams rang out over the sound of casting and blasting. The smell of burning fabric and flesh filled the air. A bolt of green shot by Ron. He ducked away in time.

The enormous wood doors began to pound, and Ron briefly wondered how the throngs of undead had gotten to the castle so quickly, unless it was even more Death Eaters banging to get in. Snape had never been able to pin down a number for Ron. Between two and eleven hundred, he'd said when pressed. He was no help at all.

It was difficult to see through the throngs of bodies all dressed in robes, half of which looked like Harry. Ron aimed for a hood, and stunned a Death Eater before he was able to aim properly. Two Harrys went down not far from him, and one of them cried out, grabbed his leg, and then Disapparated. Plan A, then, was working. Get them out, get them healed, if possible, and get them back in the fray. There were multiple Disapparitions throughout the room. Ron wondered how Hermione was dealing with the influx.

He was hit with a curse that left a purple flame against the outside of his left thigh. Ron screamed in pain as he went down, and instantly Harry was by his side. Ron clutched at his leg, but couldn't find any wounds. It felt as if the muscles were tearing inside, as if the bones were being ground to dust.

"What is it?" Harry yelled over the chaos.

"Dunno!"

"Plan A," Harry insisted.

"I think Hermione was hit with this back at the Ministry battle," Ron got out through gritted teeth. It was getting hard to think. His ears were roaring. The pain was tremendous.

"EPISKEY!" Harry called, and some of the pain receded a bit, at least enough for Ron to be helped to his feet.

Another Harry went down, and with heart and adrenaline pumping Ron was back in the thick of it. He shot down a Death Eater, and missed several others. He dodged, and wove through the crowd, trying to keep his Harry within sight, for fear of losing him to the throngs.

Then Ron saw three masked men, standing off to the back, just as Hermione had so carefully described to him. They didn't seem to be interested in attacking, and once one of them shot out a blast from his wand and it hit one of the downed Death Eaters, Ron knew he had his target. "Four o'clock!" he called to Harry, who instantly turned to see what Ron was yelling about. They had to take out the healers.

Fighting through the crowd was difficult, doing it while trying not to lose Harry was even more so. There were several times a Harry bumped into him, or elbowed him without even realizing it. The fight was hard, and people were diving left and right trying to avoid being hit. At one point Ron heard a comforting: "Constant vigilance!"

Harry managed to get the first of the three healers down, but then the other two Disapparated before Ron could get a spell out. That Ron

hadn't counted on. Would they Disapparate to some common rendezvous point, or just to another part of the hall? Ron tried to think just as Harry was blasted so hard he flew backwards and landed like lead on the stone floor. Ron jumped for him, covered him with his own body to protect him from any further attacks, and concentrated hard on Hermione in the kitchens. One excruciating moment later he appeared there with Harry lying unconscious beneath him.

"And who are you?" Hermione asked, her voice shrill and panicked. She was clearly overwhelmed with the dozens of Harrys lying hurt and bleeding and mangled around the tile floored kitchen. House elves were running here and there with water, clean rags and bandages.

"Hermione!" Ron called. "It's him! It's Harry!"

"No!" She dropped down beside him, and touched her fingers to his throat. "What was he hit with, do you know?" Ron shook his head. His amulet was intact, so they knew it wasn't that.

Hermione bit her lip, pulled out a handful of vials from a pocket, and selected the milky white one. "Tilt his head back," she ordered, and Ron helped her pour the potion down his throat. Harry choked a little, but swallowed.

"Will he be all right?" Ron asked.

"I've no idea," she said bluntly. Behind her a Harry screamed, and she cringed. "Give him this in five minutes," she said, handing him a second vial. "I'll be right back." Then she hurried off.

When Ron's Harry started coming around, Ron gave him the second vial. He drank it, shook his head. "What happened?"

"I didn't protect you is what happened," Ron said bleakly.

"You mean I managed to get myself shot. Right. Let's not do that again."

"Agreed," Ron told him. He helped his friend to his feet. "Good?"

"Will do," Harry said with an obviously painful shrug.

Hermione hurried over. "Take this with you," she said, and shoved several small bottles of the white liquid into each of their hands. "It's a general flush. It won't work on everything, so come back if it gets...which one of you is Ron?"

"I am," Ron told her.

"He is," Harry said, as he pointed.

Hermione threw herself at Ron, and kissed him hard on the mouth. "Be more careful!" she pleaded, and then, staring at his mouth, she added: "This is very weird."

Ron and Harry Apparated back to the Great Hall, where there seemed to be even more Death Eaters. Or, maybe it was that the Harrys were being thinned out a bit. The hall doors were still holding, though Ron thought he saw shadows of figures against the outside of the stained glass windows. The windows had been magically protected of course, to be as strong as the doors. But if wizards could Apparated within the castle walls, then there was no telling which spells the Death Eaters could break through. Ron had tried to allow for them to break through the doors in his strategy, but it was no good. He needed the doors and windows to hold. At least until morning.

The clock tower sounded. One.

A fire broke out at the far end of the room, and several Death Eaters were engulfed. The nightmare scene of finding Ginny in the corridor watching over the charred remains of the Death Eater she'd killed the last time they'd attacked shot through Ron, and he worried she was over there. Harry was worried, too.

"Bill and Fleur and Neville are with her," Ron reminded him. All the Order had been divided into units. No one was fighting alone.

Harry wiped the sweat from his face with the sleeve of his robe, and then refocused. "There," he said, and pointed. Five healers, focused

on their burning brethren. Harry and Ron aimed together. They got four of them before the last got away. Ron's heart raced in triumph. Adrenaline pumped through his veins, and he scanned the room for more targets.

"WATCH IT!" Harry yelled, and pushed Ron out of the way just as a Cutting Curse sliced through the air where he'd just been standing. From the floor Ron aimed and hit the Death Eater who'd shot at him. The wizard fell over, Petrified.

Harry rolled to his feet again, and was already blasting through a cluster of enemy. Ron found himself scrambling to catch up. His leg bothered him. Another Harry Apparated away, and in his wake he left one who was clearly dead. His head had been blown half off. There was a great pool of blood on the flagstone floor. Several Harrys slipped and fell.

Before Ron was able to get past, two masked men ran between him and Harry and it was all Ron could do to tuck down and roll out of the way. He hit the ground hard, and his shoulder and leg protested with burning anger when he tried to get to his feet again. Ron hit one of the Death eaters with a Jelly-Legs Jinx – it was a first year spell Ron had been good at, and at that moment it was the only thing in his mind. He chided himself on the silly spell choice, and forced himself to recall the list of battle spells Moody had drilled into him over the last eight months. Confundus, Entrancia, Expelliarmus, Incendio.

He aimed and yelled: "Petrificus totallus!" and a Death Eater went down. Behind him another turned to see his comrade fall and aimed at Ron.

"Muffilato!" Ron got out just before that Death Eater managed the incantation, and nothing more than a series of green sparks came out of the Death Eater's wand. Ron ducked, and was hit in the back, but he managed to keep to his feet.

"CHUDLEY CANNONS!" Ron heard Harry call, and he tripped a couple of steps in that direction. The Muffled Death Eater took aim again, and Ron shot him from under his left arm with a Stun Spell.

"LICORICE WANDS!" Ron called, and Harry immediately grabbed his shoulder.

"You all right?" Harry demanded. He'd been hit with something because the left side of his face was smudged with what looked like soot, and his glasses had been quickly and haphazardly cleaned.

"Fine," Ron told him. "You?"

"Where is the slimy bastard?" Harry wanted to know. "It's been hours! What's he waiting on?" A bolt of blue flew by them, close enough to light up the right side of Harry's face. They turned and fired together; Harry with *Expelliarmus*, and Ron with *Rictusempra*, the Tickling Charm. Harry gave him a sideways glance.

"Interesting choice," he said.

"Shut it."

Ron was tired, and there was so much going on around him. Where was Voldemort? "He's after you," Ron told Harry. "He's not going to waste his time with a petty battle. He'll wait, let his minions do all the heavy lifting, and then swoop in at the end when you're worn out to finish the job. It's a pretty good strategy, that," Ron told him. "If you don't care who dies."

There was a loud CRACK beside them, and Ron jumped, aimed, and hit the figure with "*Sectumsempra*!" The other Harry went down screaming, holding his chest.

"Bloody magic!" Ron swore, and he and Harry dove down to cover Ron's victim. Harry tried a Suture Spell Hermione had shown them both, but it didn't slow the bleeding much. Ron fiddled with the white potion Hermione had given them – his fingers were shaking too hard to get the cork out.

"Who are you?" Harry asked his doppelganger.

Ron knew. He recognized Neville's stripped amulet. "Where's Ginny?" Ron asked.

"Dunno – lost her and Bill an hour ago?"

"You lost Ginny?" Harry barked, and Neville cried out as his second Suture Spell went awry. "Where? Where did you last – oh, bugger it all! Never mind!" Harry jumped up and ran off, and Ron was torn. But he had a job to do, and at the moment Harry had to be his only priority. "Can you Disapparate?" Ron asked. "Stick to the plan?"

Neville nodded, and in the next second he was gone.

When Ron looked up, Harry was one of the dozens of Harrys running about the room, jumping and casting and falling and Disappearing. Ron started off in the direction he saw Harry head in, and reached out with his magic. "Licorice wands!" Ron called into the crowd. The Harry by the door was struck down with 'Die'. That couldn't have been the Harry, Ron told himself. The Harry had his amulet. It was comfort, but not enough; because Ron knew it was someone else he knew, and someone he cared about.

"Licorice wands!" Ron yelled again, angry and panicked, but got no response. His magic groped about, came into contact with several horrible energies, but nothing he recognized as being Harry's. He tried to look for Harry's amulet, but everyone was moving so quickly, and Ron felt like he couldn't move fast enough. He clutched at the pain in his thigh as he wove through the combatants, and tried to avoid direct hits. He had to dive to the floor, and the pain in his leg blinded him momentarily. He broke out into a cold sweat and retched.

And then, from the corner of his eye he saw the healer that had escaped earlier – or, if not him than another. It hardly mattered. The Death Eater was sending Mending Charms to another Death Eater near the Great Hall's door. And there at the door were three others trying to break the door's Locking Charms. They were trying to open the room to reinforcements. Ron forced himself up, blinked the dizziness back a little, and aimed as he rushed determinedly toward them. He was able to down two before he was hit by a great, green blast. It propelled him backward through the air. He hit two Harrys on his way down, his head slammed hard into the stone floor. His ears rung. The false sun was nearly blinding from this position, and it was

difficult to focus, but he was sure he saw Harry above him, pointing his wand down at Ron's chest.

"Aguamenti!" Harry yelled, and doused Ron in a spray of cold water. When Ron looked down at his chest, he realized that his amulet had burst into flames, which must've lit his robes. He'd been hit with 'Die'. Just like his dad. Ron touched his chest. He was still alive.

"All right, mate?" Harry asked.

Ron managed a nod, though it felt as if his head split open all over again, and he had to close his eyes to keep the world from spilling into it.

"Which are you?" Harry asked.

"Ron," he gasped out.

"Good, then. It's Kingsley.

"They're trying to open the doors," Ron warned him.

"Can you Disapparate?"

"Think so," Ron told him.

"Then follow the plan," Kingsley said. They were the last words Ron would ever hear from him.

Ron managed to Apparate down to the kitchens, but he appeared on top of the low, wood countertops, beneath a pile of used bandages, and so it was a few minutes before one of the house elves noticed he was there. Ron by this point was in and out of consciousness, and when Hermione filled his vision, he wasn't entirely sure she was really standing there. He had to reach out and touch her cheek to know he wasn't dreaming.

"Love you," he mumbled. Her eyes went wide.

"Ron? Ron, is that you?"

"I think so," he told her. He tried not to think too much. "Head is killing me."

Her fingers touched his forehead, and skimmed over his skull until they hit the tender patch at the back, and he threw up on her.

"Right," she said. She cast a couple of spells, and had him drink a vial. He managed to keep it down, but just. "Where's Harry?" she asked.

"Looking for Ginny. Neville lost her, and he went mental and ran off. I couldn't find him again."

"Ginny's down here," Hermione told him. "She's all right – don't worry. I was about to send her back up."

"I've got to get back as well," Ron said, and forced himself up and on to his feet. After the initial wobble he started to feel better. Well, less bad, at least.

"You need to wait ten minutes," Hermione told him, holding his waist to steady him.

"In ten minutes Harry could be blown apart up there. Several Harrys have been."

Hermione gasped and touched the front of his robe. "Ron...your amulet."

"Saved my life," he told her. "Thanks for that."

"Take mine," she insisted, and pulled it from around her neck.

"Keep it," he told her.

"You need it more than me! Please, Ron! Take it!" She forced her amulet around his neck.

"You said they needed to be personalized. That's your amulet."

"It's got your hair in it. It knows you," she said. "Take it and be safe. And find Harry."

He nodded, met her eyes. He hated leaving her. He hated having to go back up there. Somewhere the Clock Tower gonged three.

The Death Eaters at the doors had been stopped, and least for the moment, though the doors gave a little more under the almost constant battering from the other side. Ron forced himself to focus on finding Harry, and while he kept a watchful eye over the crowd, Ron reached out and searched for his friend with his magic. It was difficult with all the people in the room, and the noise and stench of flesh and blood and death and fear. Ron wiped his face with the back of his hand. Harry was in there. Somewhere.

'Licorice wands' hadn't worked last time, so now Ron abandoned all attempts at pretense. "Harry!" he yelled. "Harry! She's all right! She's safe!"

At the far end of the hall one of the Harrys turned abruptly and began to run toward him. Well that was much easier, Ron decided. Of course, it called heaps of unwanted attention to Harry and Ron stunned no less than five Death Eaters aiming at Harry on his sprint to him.

"You found her?" Harry demanded, chest heaving, sweat streaming down his red face. "I've been searching the bodies for her amulet-"

"She's with Hermione," Ron told him, and then quickly added, "she's fine. Hermione said she'll be back up here before long."

Harry's relief was tempered by this last bit of information. "I had Hermione's promise that if Ginny ended up in the kitchens for any reason at all that she'd keep her down there until this was all over. Is that Hermione's amulet? What happened to yours?"

Ron shook his head, still scanning the room. "You know that's not how this is going to play out, mate. Hermione can't keep her out of the fray. We need seven at the end, and she's one of them-"

"No!" Harry insisted.

"She's your Heart. She has to be there, Harry. You know the plan. And besides, as strong as Hermione is, she's overrun down there. I doubt she could keep Ginny even if she wanted to."

Harry whirled around, raised his wand for a fight. "Let's get this done. I want this over, one way or the other."

Everyone involved was growing tired, both Order and Death Eater alike. And Ron knew it was time to move into Phase Two. Ron wished Ginny was there, because she was far better at the Sun Charm than he, but he said the incantation and aimed at the brilliant little star, which turned a deep crimson. The whole room went red for a moment, and all through the room the Harrys pulled out the small candy Fred and George had given each of them. Ron took his out and bit down. Orange cream, his favorite. He chewed, swallowed, and just a few seconds later he felt more alert, more awake. His body still ached, particularly his head and leg, but he felt as if he'd just had a leisurely nap. The fight renewed.

It wasn't until nearly four in the morning when the first of the Great Hall windows shattered. Vampires flew in by the dozens, and appeared only marginally effected by the mock sun. They swooped down over the crowd like great black birds of prey, landing with a grace that belied their deadliness.

Ron had known this might happen. After all, Lupin's semi-transformation earlier that evening, while not complete, had been enough to drive him out of his human mind. Slughorn's solution had been simple: garlic, and lots of it. Each of the Harrys quickly pulled cloves from their robes and ate them raw. Ron's own eyes watered as he forced his teeth through the pungent heat. But it was better than a vampire bite, he told himself. He aimed as he chewed, and hit one vampire with, "Incarcerous!" so hard he flew backwards a dozen

meters as magical ropes wrapped tightly about him. The vampire hit the wall hard, bound tight as a mummy.

"Brilliant!" Harry shouted in appreciation, and fired off his own spells at a group of Death Eaters charging a fallen Harry.

A shrill scream came from somewhere to Ron's left, and he turned just as the Great Hall's doors gave way. A throng of Harrys ran that way, wands blasting, and several werewolves were cut down as even more Harrys forced the doors closed again. Three of them were blasted in the back with green bolts and fell dead against the Gryffindor crest carved into the door. Both Harry and Ron turned and gave their friends cover while another handful of Harrys tried valiantly to secure the space again.

And then something truly wondrous happened. The real sun began to lighten the sky outside. The vampires slowed, the banging on the Great Hall's doors became more and more erratic. The tide was turning. Of the Death Eaters who had been battling all night, less than half remained, and once the vampires took to the air and fled out under the protection of the short-lived, deep morning shadows, the Death Eaters began to Apparate out.

"Tell your Lord," Harry called out to the last few, "that we're done playing! If he wants me, he's to come and get me! Otherwise, tell the coward to bugger off!"

The last of them popped away, spitting as he left.

Then, the disguises that had kept Harry anonymous all night long began to fail. Ron felt the change within him like a fire boil through his skin. Whatever Hermione had put in the Polyjuice Potion to give it the longevity they'd needed, had a painful side-effect. Many of the Harrys fell to the ground as they became themselves again. Moody, Dedalus Diggle, Bill and Fleur, Ron saw them all fall to the ground as the pain of changing back played through them. It wasn't long until his own knees buckled, and he fell forward on to his hands.

When Ron looked up, Harry was bolting across the room. Ginny stood by one of the enormous pilasters that held up the cathedral

ceiling. She held her middle and looked pained, though not half as much as Ron, surely. How has she managed to stay upright? He tried to force himself to his feet, to follow Harry, protect him. He tripped and fell flat on his face. Well, at least his feet were back at their proper size again. Ron's second attempt was met with limited success, as well, but he managed to at least catch himself before he fell back to the floor.

"Phase three!" Harry shouted. The room seemed to hesitate. Then he shot a blue flare into the air, and it extinguished the sun. "Phase three!" he repeated. This time remains of the Order, save the pre-chosen few, Disapparated out.

Ginny flew into Harry's arms, and they hugged each other tight; and, as Ron forced one foot in front of the other and he closed the space between them, he saw that it hadn't been pain that had made her cry. Beside her, on the floor, lay Charlie, too still, too pale for life. His blue eyes stared empty up at the ceiling. Ice flowed through Ron's veins and his heart turned to a lump in his chest. Ron had to force his gaze from his brother. They fell on the figure beside him on the floor. Draco Malfoy. Half his face was covered in blood, and he moved as if not fully conscious of himself or his surroundings.

Ron approached with a drawn wand. "Did he kill Charlie?" Ron demanded. Ginny pulled away from Harry, and the two of them looked at Ron. "Malfoy! Did he kill Charlie?"

"Don't do it, Ron," Harry said in a voice that was too calm, too controlled.

Ron felt like screaming. "Give me one bloody reason!"

"Because you were brilliant tonight," Harry said calmly. "Because you did everything you should have, and you don't deserve to have his death on your hands."

"I should've killed him ages ago," Ron said. "I thought I had for a while."

"I know," Harry told him. "It was horrible for you."

"Better it was horrible for me, than the horrible things he did to Hermione," Ron spat out. "You're never going to let him go! And I could end this now. He'd never hurt her – or anyone again."

"No," Harry said. And then he pointed his wand at Draco. "Incarcerous." Ropes were conjured, and they wound themselves tightly around Draco's body.

"You don't want to become like me," Harry said to Ron. "Not when I want so much to be like you."

There were bodies all over the Great Hall, contorted and bloody, both Death Eater and Order alike. Hagrid's head had been blown completely off. His body was unmistakable, and had ripped through the Harry-sized robes it had worn when the potion faded away. Great, bloody, hairy corpse. Horrible. Ron had to look away to keep his sanity. And McGonagall by the door. And Amos Diggery. And Savage, the Auror. And Elphias Doge, who'd kept an eye on the Malfoys while Hermione was held captive. There were more, but Ron couldn't bring himself to look any closer. Exhaustion and relief mingled with the grief, and he found himself fighting back emotion.

"Dobby!" Harry called, and a second later the house elf appeared. Before Dobby could get a word in Harry ordered him to fetch Hermione and Lupin.

Ron turned and found Neville by the professors' platform, where their table once sat. He was on his knees, sitting back on his heels, looking stunned at Griselda Marchbanks' body. She had a gaping hole in her torso where her heart had once been. Not far from him Moody was struggling to stand. His good leg had been badly injured. Ron limped to him, needing to be useful, and not wanting to think about anything beyond Mending.

"Is it something you can fix?" Ron asked him.

Moody glared up at him for a moment before saying, "If I could have, I would have by now! That bloody Malfoy hit me with 'Shatterius'. My femur is in about 20,000 pieces right now. I managed to Muffle the

pain well enough, but the leg will never bear a load again. Bloody bastard knew it was what happened to my other leg, I reckon."

"You should've Disapparated," Ron told him. "We're in to Phase Three."

"And who's going to be his Seventh, then? Eh, pimple?" Moody demanded. "If not me, then who?"

"Shacklebolt," Ron told him. He'd already made a back-up list in his head. He'd been too afraid to commit it to parchment.

"Dead," Moody said.

Ron couldn't process that at the moment, and just went to the next name. "Dawlish."

"Dead," Moody barked. "So's Minerva and Doge." He shook his head. "It's gotta be me, pimple. We'll Sever the leg and put me on a broom. I'll lose it anyway."

Ron starred down at the wizard's flattened thigh, and touched his own. It ached something awful, but at least it was in one piece. Ron could fight. Moody could not.

"Harry!" Ron called, though he didn't look back at his friend. "Moody's out!"

"I'm in, I tell you!"

"This is war, and we're playing for keeps," Ron quote Moody's words back to him. His voice sounded oddly flat to his ears. "You're a liability now. Harry needs a new pawn."

Moody's eyes narrowed on Ron, and a slow, deliberate smile contorted his face. "Well, Ronald," he said. "You've finally come in to your own, then?"

Harry came up beside Ron, a grim expression on his face as he realized the extent of Moody's injury.

"Call Dobby," Ron told him. "Tell him to fetch Snape."

"Can Snape Heal him?"

"Snape is your new Seventh."

Harry stared at him stunned. "No. He'll never do it."

"He will, if you ask him. You need a Seventh."

"I'll take Diggory," Harry decided.

"He's dead," Moody snapped. "Ron's right. Snape is the only choice. He'll do it if you ask it of him."

"He hates me," Harry insisted. "We'll do without."

"You won't!" Moody barked. "Swallow that Potter pride, and do what has to be done! You need a Seventh. Snape will do it!"

"He killed Dumbledore!"

"Yes, he did," Ron said. "But at this moment in time, none of that matters. The only thing that matters is that Voldemort is defeated. Your only job is to see that that happens. And Harry, the worst is yet to come."

Harry's eyes were hard on Ron, and his anger was mirrored in Ginny's face. "He's right," she said. "Fetch Snape. Let's get this over with."

Harry shook his head, but he called Dobby, anyway. And while they waited for Snape, Hermione and Lupin arrived. Never had Ron been so happy to see two people, but his relief was tempered by their reaction to the carnage around them. Hermione saw Hagrid's body and screamed a miserable, "No!" Ron went to her, and she threw herself into his arms. She smelled of blood and sour bile. Dark circles ringed her eyes. He wanted to protect her from what was to come.

"Hagrid," she whimpered.

"There are too many to count right now," he told her. "We won't have much time."

Lupin, haggard and weak, touched Ron's shoulder, and then his head by way of greeting and relief. Ron gave him a nod.

Snape arrived in the next minute, bloody and limping. "I was summoned." His tone and humor were flat.

"Can you fight?" Harry asked. "You're wounded."

Snape's black eyes narrowed on Harry. "I'm fine," he said slowly.

"My Seventh is out," Harry told him, and motioned to Moody on the floor behind him. "I need a new one." It was clear Snape knew what Harry was getting at, but he waited anyway, and forced the words from Harry's tight throat. "Will you fight by my side, and help me to defeat Voldemort?"

Something changed in Snape's expression, some small twitch of his eye that held resignation and a fleeting look of relief.

There was a twinge in Ron's stomach, and suddenly it all made sense. Ron understood that this was the real reason why Snape had come to Hogwarts. It was almost beyond belief. "You severed your own arm," Ron said to him. "You did it yourself so that when you faced your Dark Lord you would be free from his control. You knew this would happen."

"I did," Snape admitted.

"But how? Did you hurt Moody?" Harry accused.

Snape's nose wrinkled as if Harry's stench offended him. "You are not the only one to receive prophecies. I was told long ago what my role in all of this would be. Your mother was very...clear."

Harry's eyes lit with fury, his knuckles went white around his wand. "I don't believe you," he bit out.

"Why am I not surprised?" Snape said dryly. "Of course, it was far more a curse than a prophecy. I don't believe for a second that she had the Sight, or you never would have received that scar...and still...the other things she promised that night have happened."

"What night? What are you talking about?" Harry demanded.

"There isn't time for this," Ron began, but Snape talked right over him.

"The night your parents were killed, of course," he said, his voice smooth as silk. "The night the Dark Lord murdered them."

"You were there," Harry accused, a new level of hatred registering in his eyes.

"I was, and though I was not the one who ultimately betrayed them, it hardly mattered. Your father and I had been enemies from the start, but Lily – she and I had been...friends. It was a betrayal for me to have simply been there. And, when she asked for my help, I refused. I've many, many regrets in my life, but that is by far the most painful."

"You expect me to believe you even cared that she died? As if you're even capable of that level of emotion."

"I grieved!" Snape roared. "I did not go there that night with the knowledge that she would die! When she threw herself in front of you I made to stop her – I would have stopped her, had the Dark Lord not stunned me into submission through the Mark!"

"You cut off your own arm?" Neville asked, dazed not only by that realization, Ron knew, but also by the previous hours of fighting. "But why? What could Harry's mum possibly have said to make you do something like that?"

"She said..." Snape began, and then he frowned and looked at Harry. "That is between Lily and myself."

"There is nothing between you and my mum," Harry snapped.

"You never answered his question," Ron prompted. "Will you be his Seventh?"

There was no time for Snape to respond. Despite the dim sky brightening outside, the room became darker and cooler, which was something of a welcome break for Ron, still sweating as he was. A gust howled through the room, and in its wake a series of cracks and pops filled the air. Half a dozen Death Eaters Apparated in among the bodies littering the floor. At their center stood a half-human figure that could only be Voldemort.

His eyes were slanted like a snake's, but red and glowing in the new morning light. His nose was nothing more than slits, his bald head covered in scales. He looked more snake-like than Harry had described and Ron wondered, as his insides turned to liquid, if that was due to the destruction of the Horcruxes; that with the different pieces of his soul now dead he was that much less human.

Panic quivered through Ron as he stared at the evil that had terrified him his whole life, the wizard who was legend and myth and curse all in one. This was it. He reached to his side and found Hermione's arm. She gripped his hand, and then they broke apart to protect their charge.

Snape stepped in front of Harry, as a Seventh should, and Ron to Harry's right, as his Second. Somewhere behind him Ron heard Moody's, "Constant Vigilance!" and then a small, "Good hunting, Ronald!" before he Apparated away. Now was the most dangerous time. Who would cast first?

Voldemort looked serenely around the Great Hall, his fangs bared as he smiled at what he saw. "Ah, yes. Severus. Such a disappointment." He flicked his wand at Snape, a move Snape must have anticipated because he parried it so well.

Harry said something in parcel tongue at this point that caused Voldemort's serpentine head to jerk towards him. "That's the problem with today's generation: no respect for their elders."

"You're not my elder," Harry said with the same confidence that Ron had witnessed with the Minister. "I saw you born three years ago. And I'll see you die today!" He raised his wand, as did his nemesis, and their bolts of magic shot to each other, connected, and fanned out through the room, creating a second magical ceiling, this one just inches above the combatants.

One of the eager Death Eaters aimed, and Snape Stupefied him before he was able to get the incantation out. After that, spells from both sides were volleyed all over the place. Ginny had a Shield Spell wrapping her and Snape – as he was the Seventh, and therefore hers (as Harry's Third) to defend. She protected Snape, who defended Harry. They all knew their responsibilities, and though he'd not verbally agreed, Snape was fighting fiercely for the Order. Ron felt a surge of pride for his comrades. Neville managed to down one of the Death Eaters before he was hit in the shoulder. Ron saw him fly backwards from the corner of his eye, but he didn't have time to see if he was all right. He dodged a blast, and hoped that whatever Neville had been hit with, Hermione could handle. She was Harry's Fourth, the Protector.

Harry began to grunt under the strain of the connected wands. The energy ceiling began to buckle up, and then it exploded into a shower of magical sparks. The blast was deafening, and Ron was thrown to the floor. His leg erupted in a fresh bolt of agony that shot all the way up his spine. He cried out, though he managed to swallow some of it, and grabbed at his thigh.

"Ron!" He heard Hermione scream. Her voice sounded a long, long way off.

"I'm good!" he yelled back. He tried to scramble to his feet, but his leg gave out twice before he managed to get upright, and in that time Lupin took a shot of blue magic to the stomach. He went down hard. There was no time to spare, though. Harry and Snape and Voldemort were exchanging fire, hot and heavy. It was amazing to see, actually; the skill and talent so very obvious. Harry was in his element here, as horrible as that was. This was where Harry Potter the wizard became Harry Potter the legend. This was where he lived up to his mythos.

Ron would've been tempted to cheer his friend on had the stakes not been so high. Instead, Ron tried to focus on his own responsibilities, as Harry's Second. He returned fire, and then set about analyzing the other side.

Voldemort was the only one firing at Harry, so the orders there were clear. Two of the Death Eaters were down, and of the four remaining, only one seemed to be guarding his master. The others were...what? Distractions? Meant to take care of the Order? If the Guard was Voldemort's Seventh, then which was his Second? Ron met the critical, light eyes of Lucius Malfoy, and Ron knew – he knew! And as Malfoy's eyes went wide, he knew Malfoy knew as well. Standard wizard dueling protocol insisted on a Second to quantify changing strategy in the field, and Malfoy was Voldemort's.

Malfoy's smug grin set Ron's stomach boiling, and his wand flew up just as his enemy's did. They fired, but Ron was younger than Malfoy, and was able to then drop to the ground, and roll to one side before getting another, critical shot out.

"Obliviate!"

His first missed Lucius, his second grazed his arm and chest. It was enough. Malfoy stumbled forward, his long, silver-blond hair flew into his face, and when he managed to swipe it aside, there was a look of complete incomprehension in his arrogant eyes. He spun around, took in the devastation in the room, and then, as luck would have it, his gaze landed on Draco tied over by the door leading to the antechamber. He trotted over in that direction, having completely forgotten the battle.

Voldemort faltered, and Ron wondered if he sensed Lucius' confusion through the Mark. He gave a snarl born of frustration, and shot at Harry with a non-verbal. Snape didn't react fast enough, and part of the spell hit Harry in the stomach. He cried out, grabbed his middle, as he was hit by part of the purple beam. Snape, who'd gotten the majority across the chest, went down. Ron couldn't see any damage on either of them, but he didn't doubt Voldemort had done something horrible. Harry's whole face had gone stark white, and he was now sweating profusely. Snape was unconscious.

The clock in the tower chimed six.

From somewhere to Ron's right, a Death Eater called, "Die!" and Ginny screamed an anguished, "NO!" Ron couldn't help it. As he turned he saw his sister dive in front of Neville. She took the spell in the chest, and fell crumpled to the floor. Hermione was on her in a second, and Ron had to yell, "Neville! FIGHT!" to pull Harry's Fifth back into the battle. Then he grabbed Harry's arm to keep him from rushing to Ginny's side.

"She's got an amulet!" Ron reminded him.

Harry tried to jerk away, but another bolt came right for them, and Ron had to throw them both to the ground to avoid it. Furious and a bit mad with exhaustion and fear, Harry leapt up, holding his belly, and unleashed on Voldemort. For the first time since the Death Eaters arrived at midnight, Ron felt Harry inside his well.

Harry hit Voldemort over and over with a volley of Cutting and Slashing Spells, with a Burning Curse, and with The Cruciatus. But Voldemort just threw his head back and laughed, his wand raised, a single Protective Charm taking all the magic Harry could throw at him. Harry wasn't deterred. He reached down deeper, and Ron felt his cold float higher within him. Then another wand started firing at Voldemort, and Ron realized Neville had managed to incapacitate the last of the Death Eaters, who was vomiting up a seemingly endless string of rotting rodentia. With Harry so deep in his well Ron could do little more than raise his wand in a threatening stance, but then spells came from the other side of Ron as Lupin regained his feet, looking about as sick as the morning after Tonks had died. He lowered his head and bore down, shooting spells if not fast, then at least strong. Voldemort's laughter stopped, but his serpent's eyes looked more intrigued than worried.

"Is that...? But no, it's can't be. Can it?" Voldemort began, and a smile snaked across the slit he called a mouth. Fangs glinted in the magic that pooled over his Shield. "Harry – you found yourself a Smisurato. How quaint. How wonderfully archaic. I wonder which of you it is..."

More shots from over Ron's right shoulder, and Hermione joined their fight. And then, Ginny on the left, by Harry's side. They all called, all yelled their incantations, over and over, and Ron saw at all once Voldemort's plan. Shooting this hot it wouldn't take long for them to exhaust the vast majority of their energy wells. Harry was already weak. Lupin would probably be the first to fall away, and then...it didn't matter. None of them would be able to keep up the blasting for any length of time. And in the end, it had to be Harry, didn't it? Harry and Voldemort.

Ron looked over at his friend. Sweat had pooled behind his glasses, his hair was spiked and clumped with it. His face was pale, his dark eyes blazing, almost as if with fever. Harry was fighting for his life. Ron couldn't see how he was going to win.

Snape started firing again, as he slowly rose from the ground. His expression was one of complete concentration.

Harry dropped to his knees, a grimace of pain and exhaustion on his face. "Retreat!" he gasped out. Snape grabbed his shoulder, and they Disapparated out. It was Lupin's job as Sixth to see that everyone got away, and Ron gave him a terse nod before he closed his eyes and materialized in the dining room at number 12. Red morning sun streamed through the gauzy drapes, coloring Harry who'd collapsed on the floor. Snape was over him, casting.

"He all right?" Ron asked, though it was obvious he wasn't.

"Dolohov's curse. Where's that blasted girl?" Snape snapped. Hermione Apparated in a moment later and Snape called her to him. "You cast the Regenerative while I Seal the wound," he commanded. "We must act quickly."

Neville appeared on Ginny's sleeve, who immediately flew to Harry's side. Then Lupin.

"He's coming!" Lupin shouted, and a second later Voldemort was there. In number 12. Ron stood stunned. It was impossible! How could he possibly--?

Voldemort struck before Ron could finish his thought, and Snape threw himself over Harry's body in an attempt to shield him. The Cutting Curse sliced his torso in half, and a shower of blood sprayed across the room. Half of him landed on Harry, who grunted at the impact, the other half on Hermione.

"War Room," Harry said on his next gasp.

Ron, Neville and Lupin hit Voldemort hard, forcing him to conjure a Shield, which prevented any more attacks while Hermione and Ginny got Harry to his feet. Ron fed him a little energy, enough so that he could climb the stairs. They followed, fighting backwards up to the second landing where Harry threw open the linen closet and said the incantation that transformed the shelves stuffed with towels into a portal. One by one they climbed in, but the door was too narrow to allow people already through to continue to cover those on the outside. Ron saw immediately that whoever was last through the door would easily be shot down.

"What are you waiting for?" Lupin yelled over their blasting.

"Harry!" Ron called through the closet. "Close the door!"

"Ron! Inside!" Lupin shouted.

But Ron shook his head.

"Both of you! In!" This was Hermione's stern voice. "Trust Harry!"

Trust Harry? Harry couldn't see what was happening in the narrow corridor. Voldemort was less than a meter from Hermione's old bedroom door! When he lowered his Shield he would certainly flatten them both.

"You first!" Ron called to Lupin.

With frustration on his haggard face, Lupin grabbed Ron, crushed him against his chest, and hurled the two of them as one through the opening where only one should've fit. They hit the metal floor on the

other side, and before Ron could untangle from Lupin and roll out of the way, a rush of wind swept into the room. Voldemort had made it inside.

Ron scrambled to his feet, and felt the heavy slam of metal on metal as the magical door sealed itself shut. The War Room was their last resort; the back-up to the Plan. It was the only part that Harry had insisted on, and the only part Ron didn't know anything about – and not by his choice. Harry had said he knew what he was doing, but now Ron worried. This couldn't be right – couldn't be what Harry wanted. To lock them all inside with Voldemort? Ron couldn't see him – he was on the floor behind Ginny and Hermione, the both of whom were, with Neville, hurling hexes at the enemy. Lupin started fighting almost immediately from the other side, but Voldemort's Shield went all the way around.

Harry was hardly drawing any energy, and Ron prodded him a little with his magic. He got no response. Panic began to twitter in his chest. "Harry!" he called. Again, nothing.

The room, with its plain, smooth ceiling, walls and floor wasn't overly large, and it quickly filled with the smell of discharged magic and hot metal. They were all still firing, not that it achieved anything except that it forced Voldemort to remain on the defensive. Again, Ron saw no way out of their situation. It was only a matter of time now.

When Lupin collapsed, Voldemort waved his off hand through the air. And through his own Shield Charm he was able to send Neville and Hermione flying. They hit the wall hard, and slid down into crumpled heaps. The next swipe tossed Ginny and Ron against the opposite wall. There was nothing between Voldemort and Harry now, who was on his back breathing heavily, his head to one side as he watched his nemesis advance.

Lupin shot a Shield Spell over Harry, and a shimmering gold net cocooned him. Ron tried to stand and fell on his bad leg.

"Enough playing," Voldemort said. "Shall we get down to business? I want to see what makes you so Chosen." He lifted his wand. "Crucio!"

Beneath Lupin's Shield Charm Harry screamed in absolute agony. The veins of his neck and face rose as his body twisted to get away from the pain.

"Tell me, Potter, why the Fates would choose you." Voldemort let up on the spell and Harry coughed up a little blood. He didn't try to sit up.

"You chose me," Harry told him, his voice weak. "Not the Fates."

"Nonsense," Voldemort hissed.

"When you came to my house all those years ago, when you killed my parents and marked me - you chose me then. You could've picked any magical child born around my birthday, but you didn't. You chose me." Harry licked his lips. "Because I had what you never did. I had a loving family. Neville's parents were already gone...Bellatrix LaStrange had already driven them out of their minds. But I still had my parents. And they had friends – true friends! Great friends!"

"Not all of their friends were so true," Voldemort said. "And what will your friends do for you now?"

Voldemort raised his wand, and Harry raised his, and they both yelled, "AVADA KEDAVRA!" at once.

Lupin's Shield Charm exploded with a BOOM that shook the whole room, as their magical streams linked again. Only this time Ron could feel Harry inside his well, and through Harry, Ron could feel Voldemort, and was very wrong. Moody had warned them so many times never to share energy while Harry was touched by Voldemort. Ron could feel the rotting tendrils of magic slither into him, felt his cold grow even colder as his magic was swallowed up even though it was still inside his well. Ron gave a guttural grunt, and tried to push Voldemort out.

"Ah," said Voldemort. "So it's the red one."

His hold inside Ron became even stronger, and Ron's magic flew out of him faster than it ever had before. He tried to tamp down on it, tried

to fight, but it made little difference. Voldemort's control was unlike anything he'd ever experienced. It was, as Snape had said, genius.

"What are you doing?" Harry demanded, and Ron knew he was yelling at him.

"I can't..." was all Ron could get out.

Harry held his wand with two hands, and still he was slowly losing the struggle. "Ron! STOP!"

"I...can't..." Ron closed his eyes, tried harder, and felt a horrible, painful ripping sensation.

"Ron.." Harry eeked out through clenched teeth. "Stop feeding...me! Give it all to him!"

Harry was brilliant. He was bloody, brilliant. But would it work?

"Hermione...share with Harry! You and Ginny together..." He heard her begin to protest. "When I say...you and Ginny...together..." The pain was starting to take over his whole body, cloud his mind. Ron struggled to get out, "Seventh order, Hermione...this is...seventh order magic...nothing else matters...give Harry your magic..."

Ron's connection with Harry was thread-thin, and it would take nothing at all to sever it. He took a deep breath, screwed his eyes shut against the horror that was surely to come, and yelled: "NOW!"

Harry was gone from him in an instant, and Ron turned his entire focus on that remaining tentacle drawing from his well. He stopped fighting and instead reached all the way to his cold and forced it up and up through Voldemort's hold until Ron knew he was inside the belly of the beast. The stench was unlike anything Ron had ever imagined. It wasn't just a smell. It filled his every sense a hundred times over with putridity and loathing and unquenchable desire. Ron pushed deeper and deeper into the evil, into the hatred, fighting his way in, stuffing magic through. Voldemort knew he was there, and at first he welcomed the flow, pulled Ron in deeper.

There was a ripping, and Ron knew what it meant this time. He was ripping the very fabric of his magic from the walls of his well. But he didn't stop. He refused to give in, refused to be defeated. He was quickly reaching the end of his endless supply of energy. Hermione was right, nothing in nature was endless.

Oh, Hermione, he thought. The ripping was harder to ignore, and soon, he knew, he'd burn out completely. In that second Ron understood what it took for Snape to sever his own arm.

"Stop," he heard inside his head. It was Voldemort's command, Voldemort's voice in his mind.

Ron had no ability to even attempt to fight Voldemort's control, and he cried out as his magic stopped flowing and then slowly began to retreat, because along with Ron's returning magic, Voldemort came with a vengeance. He was going to burn Ron out, going to turn his own weapon against him. And Ron couldn't stop him; he'd had no Occlumency - though even if he did, it was doubtful that even as a Smisurato Ron would be any match. Voldemort was a tidal wave, and Ron was standing on the beach with his arms out stretched trying to stop him.

And then, braced for the crush, Ron heard the words over his own thumping heart; heard Harry's voice deliver the death blow on a cry. There was no victory in that voice, only a wish for it all to be over. Ron felt the blow through Voldemort – an instant of shock, of disbelief. There was a claw that for a split second grabbed Ron's magic, and when the talons were gone so was the cold in Ron's well.

He fell backwards into the easy void of unconsciousness knowing Voldemort was dead, and that the price had been paid.

End of chapter 22

Chapter 23 – Happy Birthday, Harry

He heard a familiar voice: "Envenerate. Damn. Neville, you give it a try."

Then, there was another voice, a less certain voice. "Envenerate!"

"Try it on Ginny, then." It sounded like Lupin's voice, only weaker, rougher.

"Envenerate!" the other voice said. There was a small, feminine groan.

"Good," said Lupin. "Now Hermione."

Hermione? Ron's eyes shot open, but his brain was still in a fog. He stared at the smooth, dark ceiling. The War Room. And Charlie was dead.

"Envenerate!" said the other voice. Neville, Ron realized, blinking. He looked terrible. Hermione moaned and curled on her side. She looked terrible, too.

"Good work," Lupin praised, and then glanced over at Ron. "And there you are. Nice of you to join us." The tired smile that turned Lupin's mouth was full of relief.

Ron found it difficult to move, so he settled for blinking and swallowing.

"Shall I try Harry again?" Neville asked.

"No," Lupin told him. "You won't be able to wake him."

"Harry?" Ron gasped. There was something wrong with Harry. He was lying there on his back, his head off to one side with his wand half-tumbled from his limp hand. Blood trailed from his lips, and he looked dead. Charlie was dead. Ron turned the other way and saw Voldemort's smoldering remains. His snake face was twisted with the agony of his final moment. Voldemort was dead. That meant...

"Harry?" Ron asked though there was little voice behind the word.

"He's alive," Lupin said.

Ron closed his eyes. Why was that not reassuring?

"Ron, can you feed him some energy? He won't need much. Just enough to wake him up so that he can open the door. Once we're through, Neville here can send his Patronus for help."

Just a little magic for Harry. Right. Ron began to reach down inside his well for his cold, but he found it floating at the top. Odd. It had never been there before. Then, with that floating cold Ron reached out for Harry. What he found shocked him. Harry's magic was there, but draining.

"Someone's...taking from him," Ron gasped out. But who? Hermione and Ginny, were only half conscious, and Neville – well, Ron was fairly sure he didn't know the first thing about the technical aspects of energy transfer.

"There's no one here to take," Lupin told Ron, echoing his own thoughts.

"His magic is draining," Ron insisted.

"Draining?" Lupin asked. "Or leaking?"

"Leaking?" How could magic leak? Unless the well was cracked, somehow. Broken. Like Charlie and Hagrid and Professor McGonagall...and Snape - he'd been sliced in two. Right there, in the dining room. His intestines had sprung out all over Hermione like bloody springs. Ron looked over at her again. She was caked in blood.

"Ron. Concentrate. Harry's hurt worse than I thought," Lupin said quickly as he forced Ron to sit up, shoved a knee behind him to hold him there. "You need to feed him as much energy as it will take to get

him to open the door, but no more, mind you. We need to get him to St. Mungo's immediately."

Grounding his resolve, Ron pushed into Harry, and his friend, from across the room, gasped. Thick, dark blood seeped out from between his lips and dribbled down the side of his face to the floor.

"Harry," Lupin said authoritatively. "Open the door."

Harry shook his head. His bloodshot eyes rolled, unable to focus. "Can't..." he got out.

"Harry, listen to me," Lupin began again. "Voldemort is dead. You killed him. You've done what you needed to do. It's safe to open the door, Harry. He can't get to the outside world any longer. He can't hurt anyone else."

"Dead," Harry echoed.

Ron felt an odd sensation, similar to the burn he felt when he held his breath too long. He didn't know what was happening, he'd hardly sent any energy through to Harry, but his feed began to dwindle. He broke out into sweat again. His stomach cramped up. "Open the door, mate!" Ron urged. "You've got us trapped in here!"

"Harry, open the door!" Lupin commanded. He saw the expression on Ron's face, the shock and realization in Ron's eyes. There wasn't time to bring Harry to his senses – Ron's magic was failing.

"Oh, bloody...trust me, Harry. Trust Ron. Open the damned door!"

"Please, mate. Please."

Harry closed his eyes, swallowed. Then came the heavy whine of metal sliding against metal as the door slowly swung on its magical hinges. What was left of Ron's fine tether of magic to Harry snapped, and he felt as if he was falling backwards into his own drained magical well. He felt odd, like he was a cloud breezing through pudding. Somewhere far off he heard Lupin's voice.

"Neville, cast your Patronus! Send it to...blast it all! Who's left? Send it to..."

It was right about then that Ron passed out.

St. Mungo's wasn't a place Ron had spent a great deal of time, and even so, when he woke up he knew exactly where he was, and that something was very, very wrong. The lights in the long room were dim, and dozens of wizards in Auror robes stood around, watching and waiting. The healers were there, too, most of whom were huddled around one bed in particular. They talked in hushed voices, gestured, carried thick, heavy books. In that way they sort of reminded him of Hermione.

He found her two beds down, curled on her side, the blankets pulled up to her chin. Someone had cast a Cleansing Spell on her, and put a salve on the small cuts on her cheeks. Lupin was between them, softly snoring on his back. Both his arms rested above his head, and his wrists were bound to the bed frame with heavy chains that glowed with magic.

Ginny was on Ron's other side. She slept with her wand grasped tightly in her hand, her face frowning, her body rigid and straight. Ron's mum sat beside her. There were others in beds that Ron recognized as well; among them Dedalus Diggle and the twins.

But, it was the commotion that took place on the other side of the room that drew Ron's attention, and with an uneasy stomach Ron forced himself up, and then ever so slowly, out of bed. The smooth floor was cold beneath his bare feet, and the patient robes he'd been dressed in did little to conserve body heat. His head ached as if it had been smashed with a Bludger, his eyes swam a little. A gasp behind him told him his mother had finally realized he was up, but he couldn't turn around; it was far too hard to simply go in a straight line. Slowly, steadily, Ron made his way across to the other bed, past the Aurors, and between the healers.

Ron was stunned into stillness at the sight of his friend lying dead in the bed. His heart skipped erratically, his vision dimmed around the edges, and a strange chill filtered through him that brought with it

tears of anger and grief. Harry Potter was dead. But even more than that, Harry, Ron's best mate, was dead.

He'd known it could happen, they all had known. But knowing and seeing were two different things, and Ron hadn't been prepared for the reality of it. Ron's knees gave out and he stumbled to one side. Someone caught him, someone else pushed a chair beneath him, told him to rest his elbows on his knees, told him to breathe deeply.

Harry, Harry, Harry, his mind reeled.

Ron hadn't protected him. He'd been Harry's Second, and he'd failed him. He'd killed him just as surely as if he'd cast that spell himself. He'd killed Harry Potter. He'd killed his best mate. Emotion boiled in his belly, his soul screamed in pain.

"Try to breathe deeply," said one of the healers.

Ron ignored her, and pushed himself up again. He had to be strong for Harry. He tried to push down the swell of emotion that threatened to erupt, to stamp it out like a grass fire. There was heat on his cheek, and Ron brushed away the tear. Harry wouldn't want tears. Not after what they'd just been through. Not after he'd saved the world.

Grey skin, black hair, lifeless. Harry. It just didn't seem real. It was more like a nightmare. Ron's head swam and his guts wanted to come out his throat. A nightmare then, Ron decided. It had to be. He reached out brush the tips of his fingers against the cold tips of Harry's.

Harry opened his eyes, and Ron nearly jumped out of his skin. A chair was shoved against the back of his legs, and this time he sank into it as he looked at his friend and his friend looked back. Harry's eyes were sunken, bruised; his lips as pale and chalky as the rest of him; his scar had bled and clotted black as if it were branded new. Harry had barely enough energy to blink at Ron, but his lips moved, and Ron, heart hammering, leaned close enough to hear him.

"Volde...dead?"

"You got him, mate," Ron assured. He touched Harry's arm just to be sure he wasn't hallucinating. His skin was clammy. Ron pulled the blankets higher.

"Ginny?"

"She's fine," Ron said. "She's sleeping over there." He jabbed his thumb over his shoulder.

Harry swallowed. "Love her..." he whispered.

"I know," Ron said.

"We all know. You said her name non-stop for the first three hours we were here." Neville was standing with his back to the wall, his arms crossed and his wand still in his fist.

"Oi," Ron said, unable to hide the surprise of seeing him there. He was so tall now, that he blended in with the Aurors. Or was it that new, hard expression that left him looking as chiseled and battle weary as the Aurors? There was something of Moody in his eyes. "Neville, you good? Why are you still here?"

"Where else would I be? With my gran?" He scoffed. "Sent her a message right after we got here, you know, just to let her know that I was alive and all. Said Harry'd done it; killed the bloody bastard. She sent a note back saying she didn't believe a word of it. Said the Daily Prophet has already announced Harry's untimely demise – eulogy and everything written by his Head of House, Professor McGonagall. They said Voldemort is in control of the Ministry now, and that all the Muggle-borns are to be rounded up. There've been Muggle murders all over the country. Never mind that McGonagall snuffed it and couldn't have written a word, or that I was there watching as Voldemort died, or that Harry's lying there looking at me – no I'm the liar!" He kicked the wall behind him in his frustration.

"Is that...are they rounding up the...Muggle-borns?" Harry asked. "Are they...killing...Muggles?"

Neville's angry face darkened. "There are hundreds of them, Harry. Death Eaters. Hundreds more than we fought yesterday. They've come out of the woodwork like roaches."

"Was it yesterday?" Ron asked, disoriented.

"I've got...to...stop them," Harry said, and made to sit up. He barely had enough strength to lift his head. "Ron, a little...help."

Ron shook his head. "I've none to give, mate. Voldemort was inside my well when you vanquished him. He took my Smisurato with him when he died."

Harry's brows rose in concern, and Ron felt the tiniest wiggle play across the cold that now floated at the top of his well. "Feels different," he said, his voice weak.

"Tell me about it."

Then something must've occurred to Harry because his eyes went wide. "Hermione?" he asked.

"Sleeping," Ron told him. "And Lupin, too. Though he's chained to his bed."

"It was the only way I could get them to bring him here," Neville said, glaring at the healers. "They kept calling him a half-breed. Half-breed! He's a bloody war hero, is what he is!" He turned to Harry. "Oh, and by the way, until Ron's up and about, I'm your Second."

"Er..." Harry closed his eyes. "Thanks, Neville...but the war's...over."

"Hardly," Neville said, and then glared back out over the room.

'Constant vigilance,' popped into Ron's head.

Both Ron and Harry looked at their friend. Neville had taken some damage; the front of his robes were burned, and a gash had been quickly Healed along his left ear. But it was the set of his brows, the hardness in his shoulders that spoke volumes of the changes he'd

undergone in the past twenty-four hours. He was a wizard transformed.

"Ron, help me up." Harry held out his arm, and Ron eased him into a sit.

Protests came from every side. Healers mentioned the delicate spells they'd performed on Harry's well, and the internal bleeding they'd only hours before managed to stop completely. Ron understood and shared their concern. Harry was terribly weak, and looked dead. And, he needed help balancing. Ron held him up as they limped across the room toward Ginny. Ron's mum hurried over.

"You're leg, Ronnie," she said in her gentle, imploring voice.

"It's fine," he told her. In truth it only twanged when he put weight on it, which was a vast improvement.

"No," she said. "It's not. The healers have given you a Pain Muffle, but your leg-"

"It's fine," he said again, and then added a quiet, "Later." There were other things they needed to worry about. His leg worked, and it wasn't killing him, and that's all he cared about at the moment.

He lowered Harry on to the side of Ginny's bed. When Ron turned his mother was looking at him with tears in her red-rimmed eyes. Her face was already swollen from crying.

"Oh, Ron. I thought...well, never mind what I thought. I should know better than to believe a word the Daily Prophet prints. I'm just so...proud of you." She hugged him tight and he squeezed her back. "I'm so relieved you're alive – and your brothers. Bill was here earlier with Fleur – they're all right. Nothing that some rest won't cure."

Ron pulled away from her. Embracing her felt like he was lying to her. He didn't want to say what he knew had to be said, but she needed to know. And, it had to come from him.

"Uh...Mum. Can we sit a moment. My leg..." he said by way of excuse. He led her over to the other side of the room, to an empty bed with no one in earshot. He wished he could tell her someplace more private. He wished he didn't have to tell her at all. Ron's attention was caught by Fred and George, both enjoying the deep sleep that came only with a potion. They looked reasonably well considering. It wasn't that they'd managed to survive – Ron had made sure that they would. He'd engineered it that way. He chose to protect the two of them, and had to neglect others.

With a sigh, Ron took his mother's hand and laced his fingers through it. He closed his eyes and told her the truth. "I don't know how it happened, or when...but Charlie...I'm so sorry, Mum."

"Charlie?" her voice squeaked. She didn't move, didn't breathe – she just stared into his eyes as hers filled and then overflowed.

"I don't know what or who...but he was fighting with Professor McGonagall and Mr. Diggory and Dawlish – you remember Dawlish, from the Ministry?"

She didn't nod.

"None of them made it. They're all gone."

Her head began to shake, barely a tremor at first, and then she yelled a "NO!" that just about stopped Ron's heart. Spit flew from her mouth as she cried. She pulled away from him, pushed his hands away. "No!" She stood, and Ron stood as well. She paced a little, shaking her head, and then she turned and slammed her fists against his chest. He held her while she hit him, unable to do anything more to stop her pain – one that he knew he shared only in fractions.

Then she retreated. She broke down and had to lean against a table at the end of the bed for support, knocking over several bottles of potions. They smashed on the floor, and healers came running. Tensions in the room were dangerously high. Several of the Aurors raised their wands at her before they realized there was no threat. Ron's mum was sobbing.

Harry was bent over Ginny, and they both turned. Ginny began to cry, too. Ron's heart felt like it was bleeding in his chest. Harry kissed her knuckles, and then somehow made it to his feet on his own and went to Ron's mum. He embraced her, consoled her as Ron hadn't been able. She wept on his shoulder.

Ron had put Ginny with Bill and Fleur because, although Ginny was a strong and powerful witch, Bill and Fleur had years of experience on her as well as sharp reflexes. It had been purposeful and calculated to keep her and Neville as safe as possible. Fred and George had been paired with the Aurors Cothwaith and Waddington. Charlie, though, had been matched with Mr. Diggory, who probably hadn't seen a duel since his days at Hogwarts (if then), and Professor McGonagall, who was an exceptional witch, but older and far less nimble in a fight. Ron had hoped that Dawlish would've been enough to help Charlie. He'd bet Charlie's life.

Had Charlie known? Had he looked around and seen the groups and understood? Had McGonagall? Had Hagrid?

Ron's own eyes burned and he turned to garner what little privacy he could. He needed to get out of there; to do something – anything. He fought the tears, knowing if they came they would overwhelm him, and once the dam burst Ron would surely be carried away in a flood of guilt.

Close it off, he told himself. Make it stop.

Over his mother's crying and the whispers of the healers Ron heard a baby coo. He turned, searched and then found little Jack next to his father's bed, swaddled tightly and lying in a basket covered in blue frills. The pressure in Ron's chest bubbled up, and he had to swallow convulsively to keep it down.

Suddenly dizzy again, Ron sat on the closest bed, and he turned to see it happened to be Hermione's. Her hand clutched reflexively at him, found his wrist, and she groaned his name in her sleep. He felt another tug at his heart as she pulled him down to her. Ron had no fight left in him; he allowed her to guide him down until he was lying on his side, his back to her. Her arm snaked beneath his and hugged

his chest. She sighed against the back of his neck. As brilliant as it felt to be held, Ron found it impossible to relax. His mother's tears and Charlie's dead eyes consumed too many of his thoughts.

The following evening in the manse parlor Harry and Ginny shared a lap rug on the couch, and Neville was next to them in a chair. Hermione was curled against Ron on the floor in front of the crackling fire. They talked about what to do about the Death Eater problem, Voldemort's body, and their recently collected dead. The mood was somber and heavy, and they were all still exhausted when, under the cover of darkness, the Death Eaters set number 12 ablaze. Neville and Hermione fought the fire while Ron and Ginny tried to get Harry out, but the green flames were magical and couldn't be easily doused.

None of the five of them were in top form, having only just left St. Mungo's a few hours before, but they managed to get out of the manse well enough only to be surrounded by Death Eaters once out on the Muggle street. Ron immediately pushed an unarmed Harry behind him as the first blasts shot past. Ginny had taken Harry's wand for fear that any further casting would irreparably crack his well wide open.

They were greatly outnumbered thirty to five, but Hermione, Ginny, and Neville immediately returned fire. Ron cast his Patronus in an attempt to Shield them all, but he'd forgotten about his weakened well, and almost immediately his Patronus dissolved. Even a Jelly-legs Jinx was beyond him at the moment. Hermione stepped in front, her arms out-swept to Shield him and Harry. They were going to be slaughtered.

Ron tried to force his brain to think. If they couldn't fight, they needed an escape.

And then it happened. Ron saw the Death Eater as clear as day - a man he'd known, but whose name escaped him. He saw the short, dark wand aim at him, and the green flash of spell let loose. He felt the impact, the shock of what had happened, the indignity that he'd survived Voldemort only to be cut down by an underling as little more than an afterthought. He felt the ground slam hard against his head, reawakening the wound he already had there. And, as darkness

crowded the edges of his vision, Ron registered the word that had come from the Death Eater's angry cry. "Die!"

Only he didn't. Ron waited for his heart to stop hammering in his chest.

"RON!" Hermione cried, unable to turn because of the fight, but he heard the panic in her voice. "Ron Weasley, answer me!"

"He hit me with 'Die'," Ron said, grunting at the renewed pain in his head. The front of his shirt and Hermione's amulet were smoldering. "When you get a moment, you might just put me out," he said. "If it's not too much trouble."

"What?" she cried, and turned to catch a glimpse of him. "Oh, honestly, Ron, you scared me to death!"

Harry was beside him, then, to smother the flames with his own balled shirt. "We've got to get out of here," he said quickly. "To the Burrow?"

"I don't want to bring these lovely people home to mum," Ron said. His head was ringing, and sparkles danced in the darkness.

"The Ministry, then," Harry said, and then louder so that Neville, Ginny, and Hermione could hear above the casting. "To the Ministry!" The Minister didn't refuse to see Harry this time because Harry didn't give him a chance. The Undersecretary was struck dumb when he saw Harry stride into the office pulling his sooty shirt back over his head, and the wizard sat motionless as Harry slammed the Minister's door open and walked right in. Ginny, Neville and Hermione followed, as did Ron, dizzy and sick to his stomach. The back of his head throbbed. They might as well have been invisible, though. It was Harry that the Minister's shocked, disbelieving eyes were on.

"Merlin's beard," said Scrimgeour, gaping. "You're...you're..."

"Alive, yes," Harry said impatiently. "And, wondering why you're allowing Death Eaters free reign over the country!"

"I...I..." the Minister stammered.

"Muggles and Muggle-borns are being targeted and nothing's being done about it! The Daily Prophet's been taken over by Death Eaters – not even Death Eaters, really because the real Death Eaters know that Voldemort's dead, don't they? They've surely felt it through their Dark Mark by now! But they're running amuck anyway, and you're doing nothing to stop them!"

"He's...he's...dead?"

"You're looking at me, aren't you?" Harry demanded. "Only one of us was meant to survive, and I'm standing right here!"

The Minister shook his mane and blinked rapidly. "By my starts, you are!" And slowly, the Minister sank down into his chair again. "How-how did you do it? How did you get You-Know-Who?"

"What's important now is that I did," Harry told him. "And you need to get out there and tell everyone. St. Mungo's is being over-run by casualties, and something needs to be done with Hogwarts. We've already collected our fallen, but there are a thousand rotting corpses up there that lay where they dropped when their necromancer fled."

"What? " the Minister gasped.

"Infiri," Hermione said impatiently. "When the wizard controlling the Infiri fled, he released the spell controlling them. Now all the bodies are just baking in the sun."

"And when I'm ready," Harry said, cutting in again, "I want to talk to you about adding a new Department to the Ministry. Something that will study Archaic Magic. But that's for another time. Right now you've got a country to save."

"But...but they'll demand proof," the Minister insisted. "They already believe You-Know-Who has power-"

"You can say his name," Harry stated dryly. "He won't be coming back this time."

"-and they'll be afraid to believe anything that I say. You'll have to come, Harry, my boy. Stand up next to me." His eyes glinted as he said this, and the shock of a moment before became a look of triumph.

"I rather think no," Harry said.

The Minister narrowed his gaze at Harry. He'd spent years trying to get that particular photo in the papers. "I suppose I could show them a body."

"We don't have a body," Harry told him. "The Death Eaters have made sure of that. They burned my home, and Voldemort's body with it."

"That's...convenient," the Scrimgeour said slowly. "And unfortunate. You had the body at your house?"

"It's hardly convenient," Harry snapped. "It was my home."

"Harry," Hermione said hesitantly. "I think the Minister is right. Well, I'm sorry, but I do! You need to stand up beside him, and you need to answer the reporter's questions. And when the Minister tries to take any credit at all for your victory, you can tell the whole country that it was the Minister who put innocent Stan Shunpike in Azkaban, where he still sits, while fake Death Eaters are now out and about trying to take over!"

This lit a new fire in Harry, and he turned to the Minister, who looked less and less certain of himself. "That's right. Stan Shunpike. As you'll not need a scapegoat any longer-"

The look of triumph on the Minister's face turned to fury. "Yes, yes...I'll see what I can do."

"You do that," Harry told him. "And I'd expect Mr. Shunpike would like a full pardon from you personally. I know I'd like that very much."

"Well, first things first," the Minister said. "We need to find someone that passes as a reporter in this town. And a photographer!"

They went to the Burrow because, really, where else would they go? With the shop gone and number 12 flattened, Ron and Harry were basically homeless. Hermione had her parents, of course, but they were Muggles, and he couldn't imagine her going back there to live for any length of time. Which meant they were all there – he and Harry, and Ginny, Neville, and Hermione. And his mum, of course. It was far too crowded for a wizard who just wanted to be alone.

Hermione didn't seem to understand. She looked at him when she thought he didn't notice; she watched him as if his head might explode at any moment (it still ached, and Ron wasn't entirely certain that it wouldn't). She held his hand for far longer than was even comfortable, and she got him sandwiches. She said his name over and over when she talked to him, like he might forget who he was. Or, he thought, maybe she was trying to remind herself.

The first night after the Ministry they had a row. She tried to climb into his bed, which was pathetically narrow. He needed some breathing room, and she threw it back in his face.

"It's like when your dad died all over again," she insisted. "You're trying to push me away!"

"I'm trying to get some sleep!" Ron shouted. His ears rang, and every time he shouted lights prickled in his vision. "I can't breathe with you hanging all over me!"

"You're angry at me, but I haven't done anything!"

"You're mental," Ron grumbled. "Have this bed, then. I'll sleep on the couch."

When he stormed past her he caught the glare on Harry's face, the muttered, "Watch yourself."

And then he heard the muffled sob he knew could only be Hermione's. His heart contracted in his chest, and he did stop on the stair for a

moment. But it was too difficult to force his legs to turn, and so he went down to the living room and threw himself on the sofa. He couldn't offer her comfort when he had none for himself.

For a while he listened to Hermione cry. And then, his mother began to cry as well, and Ron's chest began to hurt so much he half-hoped he was having a heart attack. And he remembered the last time he thought he was having a heart attack back at Hogwarts, and the look of confusion on Hermione's face when he asked her to go with him. The smile he discovered on his face disgusted him. How could he smile when Charlie was dead?

And Hagrid. What had Hagrid ever done to anyone? The image of his great, headless body turned Ron's stomach, and the sandwich Hermione had all but forced down him threatened to come up again. Ron lurched off the couch and propelled himself out the kitchen door as the nausea quivered through his middle. He doubled over just inside the garden, hands on knees, and waited. Nothing happened. He didn't vomit. And he didn't cry. And he wished he could just walk into the night and be swallowed up by the darkness. It would be so much easier that way. Less painful.

It was cooler now that the sun had been down for hours, and the stars seemed to be out in force. Ron's withered thigh began to burn, and he lowered himself to the damp grass. He didn't care if his pajama pants got wet. He didn't care that he could hear his sister and Harry's rhythmic love-making through their open window.

Crookshanks stared down at him from Charlie's room – well, it had been Charlie's and Bill's room once upon a time. But for as long as Ron could remember it had been the coveted guest room and his father's study (even if it had technically retained the title of Charlie's room). And now Crookshanks was perched in the window there. Ron supposed Hermione was in there as well, if Harry was in with Ginny – and judging from the amount of heavy breathing and occasional feminine moan, he was. Ron's body began to stir against his will. He disgusted himself. And now he cared that he could hear them, so he picked himself up and trudged farther into the garden, toward the swing. A gnome tripped him, and giggled as it ran away.

"Are you all right?" It was Hermione's voice, and very small. Ron looked up and saw her peer down at him from Charlie's window. He'd been right.

"Oh, brilliant," he said from between the begonias and the turnip patch. "Never better."

"Are you hurt, Ron?" she asked, exasperated.

He stared up at her, her white night robes glowing blue in the moonlight, and her hair wild. It had grown, and almost brushing her slim shoulders. Even from where he lay he could see the scars on her neck and cheek.

"Oh, never mind," she said, with a defeated sigh. "I'll come down."

She disappeared into the house before he could stop her. Not that he could really stop her, he was willing to admit. Hermione had always had a very independent mind. It was one of the things he loved about her, and one of the many reasons he loved spending time with her. She kept him on his toes, and always left him guessing.

Right now, though, he rather wanted to be alone. She stirred things in him that he couldn't deal with at the moment. Everything inside him was so very close together, and the simple act of touching her let loose an emotional chain reaction that he simply couldn't contain.

"The ground is wet, you know?" Hermione said, hands on hips, when she reached the garden.

"No kidding," Ron said.

"Are you hurt?"

"Not even my pride," Ron told her. "I've been bested by a garden gnome, and I can honestly say it doesn't bother me a bit."

"Then why are you still in the mud?"

"Well, it's terribly comfortable. And the view-"

"Ron." She closed her eyes and schooled her expression from exasperation to concern. "I need you to be serious for a moment. And I promise not to be upset, no matter what the answer is, but I need you to be honest with me."

"This doesn't sound good." In fact, it sounded terrifying.

"Nothing has changed for me – I mean, how I feel about you hasn't changed. I thought it might, after Voldemort. If the Fates only linked us for Harry's sake, so he could fulfill the prophecy, then once we were done...then, perhaps, we'd be done..."

"You thought we'd stop being Fated? Really? And you didn't say anything?" Ron sat up. The thought hadn't even occurred to him.

"It was a possibility. I knew I'd still love you, even if I didn't Love you. I'll always love you, Ron. But, well... Has anything changed for you?"

"How can you ask me that? If you're Fated, then I'm still Fated, too."

"You haven't touched me, Ron. Not once since the battle. You rarely talk to me, and when you do you don't look me in the eye. It's like you can't stand to be around me, or maybe that you don't want to be...around me anymore. I thought maybe you were angry with me, or you were trying to punish me, or punish yourself, but, well...maybe it's more than that. Is it? Is that why you're there in the mud not looking at me instead of upstairs asleep in the bed beside me?"

Ron realized he'd been staring at the moon, and he forced himself to meet her gaze. She looked pained, worried, and sad. He looked back at the moon. "No," he said weakly. He just didn't have the words to set her mind at ease, and she needed them so badly. He felt helpless and useless, and so very unworthy of her love. Or even her Love.

And the thing was, he knew that he wasn't. He knew that he was a good, decent bloke. A man his father would've been proud of – wasn't that what his mum had said? But the heaviness in his chest weighed too much, and it colored everything so completely. He didn't want to push her away, he just wanted to be alone.

"At least this time you've not been hurling insults at me, but it does feel like you're trying to push me away again. But I won't let you, Ron Weasley. Not if you still love me."

"You've no Viktor to run to any longer, have you?" A knee-jerk reaction. He heard his voice as if it came from someone else, and he winced.

She sighed. "And the insults begin."

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "This is why I want to be alone."

"You haven't done anything wrong, you know. Not one single thing, Ron. Ron. Look at me!" She had her hands on her hips. "Charlie's death is not your fault."

"I know," he said. Technically.

"Do you? Honestly? That's what this is about, isn't it? About Charlie and Professor McGonagall, and then rest of them. Just like it was about your father before. But you didn't kill your father, and you certainly didn't kill your brother. If anything, you saved Fred and George and Ginny and Bill – you saved us all, Ron. You saved Harry! You saved the whole blasted wizarding world! We're alive because Plan A worked. Your plan worked!"

The moon was waning, and there were clouds slowly making their way across the stars. Hermione gave a huff of frustration, and then dropped beside him.

"The ground is wet," he warned.

"No kidding," she deadpanned. She stretched out beside him in the grass and dirt and stared up at the sky. "I've been thinking about what you said before. You know, the last time. And, I know you don't want to Love me-"

"No," he said quickly, and then added quietly: "I do now. I do."

He could feel her looking at him. "But you don't want to make love to me?"

"I do that, too," he admitted. "It's just that it feels...wrong."

"It feels wrong to want to have sex? Or have sex with me? Or is it the act of sex-"

"Could you stop saying sex?" His body was beginning to rouse a little more each time she said that particular word, and his chest tightened as much as his lap. "I shouldn't be happy right now." He tried to find the words to help her understand. "I shouldn't feel wonderful and giddy."

"Do you feel wonderful and giddy?"

"It's wrong."

"But why? The war's over, Ron. People all over the country are celebrating."

"My mum is crying," he told her.

She rolled over to face him, her cheek propped up on the palm of her hand. "I know. I'm sorry for that. Honest, I am. I'm so sorry you had to lose someone else in your family. And your mum... But it wasn't your fault." She ran a hand over his belly and up across his chest. His nipples tightened, as did his groin. Tears burned his eyes.

"And, what about the funerals? I'm expected to say something – at all sixteen of them. What am I supposed to say? It was my plan that got them all killed."

Her fingers splayed over his heart. "You're supposed to say that they all died defending what they knew to be good and just, and that they're heroes – each and every one of them."

"They weren't warriors. They weren't soldiers. They were ordinary wizards – teachers and shop keeps, and retired clerks, and they

didn't have to die. There was another way – there had to have been. I just didn't find it."

"Plan A was the right plan. It kept Harry alive, and killed Voldemort. Yes, people we loved died, but what about the people we love who lived? The world is a better, safer place because of what you did."

But how could the world be better for Hagrid's loss? For his mother's pain? Ron couldn't wrap his brain around it. A tear slipped from his eye and he quickly wiped it away.

Stop it, he told himself. Cut it off now.

"You're grieving. And this is how you grieve, I get that now. You need your space to beat yourself up and work it all out." Hermione sat up, brushed grass from her bare arms. "I'll give you as much space and time as you need, Ron, but you are not alone in this. We're all grieving, and we're all here for you. None of us are going to let you push us away again, so don't even try." She made to get up, but he grabbed her wrist. When she turned, he met her gaze.

"Nothing's changed," he told her. "Well, nothing and everything. But nothing between us."

Her smile was small but genuine. "You're my hero, Ron Weasley."

"I'm no hero," he said, shaking his head.

"Come up with me. Let me hold you."

He closed his eyes, swallowed. Held his breath. But his chin trembled anyway, and his throat closed up, and he felt the pressure build in his stomach and he couldn't stuff it down fast enough. A sob choked him, more tears escaped from under closed lids. No, no, no, his mind chanted. Not here. Not in front of her.

"Oh, Ron," she sighed, and he lost it.

He rolled on to his side, curled himself into as tight a ball as he could. The tears came hard and fast, his nose ran, he couldn't catch his

breath for the sobs. His gut twisted and his heart lurched, and he wanted nothing more at that moment than to sink into the earth.

She touched his shoulder, but he hardly felt it. She might as well have been a million miles away; very little got past the pain. He couldn't fight the grief any longer, it was simply too much. Anger came with it in great, black waves, tearing and gouging at his insides. He stopped struggling, stopped trying to turn himself inside out. He allowed himself to be rolled on to his back.

"Breathe, Ron."

"Hurts..." he managed. His sobs started to hiccough.

"I know," she whispered to him, and pressed her cool hands against both sides of his face. She was a soothing blanket to his fever. "Just look at me and try to breathe."

"Go away," he said half-heartedly.

"Not until I know you're all right. And you're far from all right-"

He lurched at her. He hadn't intended to, it just happened. He wrapped his arms tightly around her shoulders and crushed her against him. She was half kneeling beside him, and half tumbled into his lap. Her arms circled his middle, and he wept against her neck long past the point where his back began to ache and his thigh to cramp. When at last she shifted to straddle his lap, and he pulled her even tighter.

Her fingers played over his back in slow, soothing patterns, and she whispered: "Ron, it's all right," in his ear every now and then. His sides and belly began to twinge from over exertion, and his head throbbed behind the hot sheet of tears that washed down his face.

He kissed her, his wet lips against her warm, dry mouth, and then he kissed her again. She didn't stop him, but she didn't encourage him, either. She allowed him to kiss her, and to touch her breast. She even touched him back, under his shirt on his chest and sides. But her

caresses were gentle while he groped. As his tears began to slow he felt drained, numb.

"I can barely feel you," he told her. His hands felt as if they were made of clay. "Why can't I feel you?"

"Come with me upstairs," she urged.

"No," he whispered.

"You're tired, Ron. Over-tired." She cupped his face, wiped the tears away. "Come with me. Just to sleep."

His head throbbed, and he rested it on her cool, bare shoulder. He fondled her breast again. "My hands aren't working."

She cleared her throat. "They're working quite well from where I'm sitting."

"It's like I'm wearing mittens."

"Come with me," she urged again, and pulled away. She held out a hand to help him up, and the rest of his body felt just as clumsy, just as foreign. Even that odd bit of him tenting his wet pajamas.

She led him up the stairs to his room, and closed the door behind them. He stilled her hands when she pushed his pants down.

"I can't," he told her.

"You're wet, Ron. Step out of those, and I'll find you something else to put on." She turned and bent over the trunk by his bed. He could make out the shape of her bum through the loose drape of her robes.

Ron looked down at himself, and then back at her. He stepped close behind her before she had a chance to turn, grabbed her hips and pressed himself against her. She gasped. He moaned. He bunched her robes up, hiked them high enough for him to get to her knickers and shove them down her legs. She looked at him over her shoulder.

"Ron..."

He wasn't thinking any longer; speech was beyond him. Numbness had taken over inside, and all he felt was a tremendous wanting. It ached. He thrust against her aimlessly, blinded by fresh tears, his fingers dug into her hips. Frustration gurgled from his throat. She looked at him over her shoulder, her expression blurred.

"I need..."

It was all he had to say. He felt her fingers curl around him, and his eyes rolled back. She tugged him gently forward, and he was at her heat, pressed firmly against her giving body. He looked down at their connection where his body ended and hers began. He thrust again, this time with her guidance. His body no longer ended, it had simply become part of hers.

He closed his eyes as his hips pumped, and let his head fall back. His whole existence became that part of him that was inside her, everything else fell away, muted and forgotten. He sprinted toward his finish, wanting it to be over so the numbness could take the rest of him as well. But release remained elusive. After a while his bad leg began to shake, and his knee gave out. He fell forward on to her, his cheek between her shoulder blades.

"Ron?"

"I can't."

She turned, carefully, and caught him under his shoulder. She led him to the bed. Then she knelt between his knees. She took the corner of the bedspread and cleaned him off, and then looked into his eyes. He had to look away.

Then her mouth was on him, her tongue licking over him. He gasped.
"No."

"Let me take care of you," she whispered.

"I can't." There was no voice behind the words.

"Trust me."

Her eyes were so dark, so imploring, so full of love for him that some part of him flared and he realized it was that place within him that had gaped empty not even a year ago. That place where Hermione was Fated to him. She was so beautiful.

Heat ran up his chest, up his neck and into his cheeks as he watched her look at him and lick her lips. Her hand tightened at his base, and Ron's body lurched. Pressure built before he even had a chance to warn her properly.

"Stop-" he got out before he crested, and he made a feeble attempt to push her face out of the way. "Sorry," he mumbled, and made to wipe at her cheek.

She brushed his hand away and licked the side of her mouth, giving him one of her enigmatic smiles. "Lay back."

He complied, and flopped down. The pillow seemed softer than ever, and the bed cradled his body.

"Close your eyes," she whispered, and covered him with the sheet.

He inhaled and exhaled, over and over. Eventually he felt himself sink into the mattress.

"Are you going to leave?" he whispered into the darkness.

"No," she told him, and he felt her crawl over him and slide between his body and the wall. She pillowed her head on his shoulder, and sighed.

"Good."

Never in his life had Ron ever truly appreciated the couch at the Burrow. It was soft and lumpy in all the right places after so many decades of use. Thirty years of Weasley bums had created the absolute perfect piece of furniture.

Hermione was on his left and, having slipped into the dip, she leaned heavily against him (no longer able to fight either gravity or the geometry of the cushion). Her head rested against him. The drama in the garden three nights before that had ended in his bedroom had left him feeling drained and raw, and her closeness now felt like a balm on his soul. Yes, he liked the couch very much, indeed.

Harry dozed lightly on the loveseat, his head in Ginny's lap and his legs thrown over the plush arm. He'd been doing a lot of that since they'd returned to the Burrow with Neville and Moody in tow. Moody was out and about on his two magical metal legs, testing and retesting all the protections that blanketed the Burrow. But, since the Minister's announcement, with Harry by his side, there hadn't been any further attempts on Harry, or any of the Order. And the incidence of crimes against Muggles and Muggle-born had almost returned to normal.

"Now, how did they even find Harry's house?" Neville asked. He sat beside Ron's mum in her rocking chair by the window. She had several sets of knitting needles going, and was once again working on a maroon something that looked suspiciously like a sweater. "It was un-chartable, for magic's sake!"

"Voldemort must've followed Lupin when he Apparated," Hermione said. "And when he made it through it broke the charm."

"That's ridiculous," Ginny told her. "If the charm was broken the other Death Eaters would've followed as well."

"It's not ridiculous at all," Hermione insisted. "They did follow, didn't they? And, Voldemort was a very powerful wizard-"

"Hermione, please!" Ron's mum said harshly. "Not in my house!"

"Sorry, Mrs. Weasley," she said guiltily, and brought a hand up to her mouth. "I'm really sorry."

Ron's mum wearily nodded, and went back to her knitting. She had taken Charlie's death understandably hard, and Voldemort's name

was particularly painful for her. The funeral that morning had been grueling, the reporters had been merciless. And, it had been just the ninth of eleven. They had five more in the next two days.

"Ginny!" Harry startled himself out of a dream.

"I'm here," she assured him, and spread her hand wide over his belly. He flopped back down on to her lap, chest heaving. He reached up and cupped the back of her head, and pulled her down into a kiss, her lips and an odd angle to his.

Ron quickly looked away, but not before a small thrill played through his belly. "That's just wrong," he said under his breath.

His body knew it was being deprived, and the physical attention Hermione had paid him earlier hadn't quenched that particular thirst. He was starting to feel as if he would come out of his skin every time he looked at her, or Harry and Ginny together, or even his mum's bosoms that morning before breakfast - which had scared the bloody hell out of him. In a panic he'd turned to Hermione who'd been just beside him in the kitchen and pushed her up against the pantry door. Her gasp had been lost in the kiss he'd planted on her right there in front of everyone. He, of course, had made a larger problem for himself, and he'd had to walk sideways out of the room to hide it. Snickering, Hermione had followed, but he waved her off. He was too out of control at that moment, as that kiss had been evidence. "More time," he'd whispered. She'd nodded, and left him alone.

But now, hours later, she ran a lazy finger through his hair and behind his ear. "It's not wrong. It's lovely. It's love."

This made Harry smile. Ginny looked more solemn about it. Neville just looked ill. He got up and left through the kitchen door.

"Oh, dear," Hermione said quietly. "I'm really worried about him."

Ginny looked back over the couch after Neville, too. "Has he said anything to you about his gran since we left St. Mungo's?"

Hermione shook her head. "He got an owl, and I had assumed it was from her. He stuffed the letter in his pocket, though. He didn't seem happy to have received it."

"Suppose she still doesn't believe him?" Ron asked. He knew there were a small few who were holding out hope that Voldemort's death had been greatly exaggerated, but Neville's gran couldn't possibly fit into that category. And anyway, she was nothing if not pragmatic. When faced with the reality of Harry standing there next to the Minister, how could she not believe what Neville had told her?

"I think Neville's not quite right," Hermione said. "I think...maybe I'll go and talk with him."

"I'll go," Ron said. He had a feeling he understood a little of what Neville was going through.

Out the door, though, he was surprised to see Neville halfway down the path toward the edge of Moody's magical protections. And Ron reckoned if he was heading out, he meant to Apparate somewhere.

"Oi! Neville! You leaving?"

Neville stopped, but didn't turn around. His shoulders visible sagged.

"Going to see your gran, are you? Will we see you tomorrow at Professor McGonagall's funeral?"

"Sure," Neville said quietly. Ron took that to mean 'No.'

"You want to take tea before you go?" Ron asked, feeling a little like his mum, but knowing that if he said good-bye to Neville right now it might be a long, long time before he saw him again.

Neville stared at the ground, his eyes hooded and brooding, his face longer and less full than Ron remembered. Had he not been eating? Ron's own appetite had been absent of late, enough so that Hermione had commented.

"You're not going to your gran's," Ron said. Neville looked up at him, considered him darkly. "She does believe you now, doesn't she? She sent an owl-"

"Hardly matters now, does it? If she believes me or not. Now that Harry's told everyone."

"Of course it matters. Did she...you can go home, right? I mean, you're a true friend, Neville, and you're always welcome here – Mum knows what you did with us. But, we've sorta been wondering just why you haven't gone home yet. I'm sure she wants to see you-"

Neville mumbled something and stared out past the last protective crystal along the path.

"Sorry," said Ron. "Didn't catch that-"

"My mum and dad are dead," Neville said. "Death Eaters got to 'em. Inside St. Mungo's. Were looking for Harry, I suppose, but we'd already gone to the Ministry."

"No," Ron gasped. "Neville-"

"Hardly matters," Neville said. "It wasn't like they were my parents anymore. Not really. They've been gone a long time."

"No, it matters," Ron told him. "I'm...I'm really sorry-"

Neville shook his head, took a step back, and looked uncomfortable, pained. "It's so bleeding unfair!"

"Yeah," said Ron quietly. "We'll find out who did it, Neville. We'll make 'em pay."

"They got 'em, already," Neville said. "They're already in Azkaban. There's nothing to be done." He kicked a small stone a couple of meters away, and then pulled out his wand and blew it to bits. His aim was dead on.

"So..." said Ron. "Er...Neville, so you're off to your gran's?"

"I don't think so," Neville told him. "No."

"You can stay here, if you like," Ron told him. "Not forever, of course, but the funerals are only a couple more days, and then Hermione's going to her parents' for a week. We've decided not to worry about anything until she gets back. She's calling it our mental holiday."

"You're mum..."

"Yeah," Ron said with a nod. "I know. She was like this after dad died. Trust me, she's better with people in the house, at least at first. She'll need some time to herself later, of course, but for now, even with the crying, it's best someone is with her."

"And then what?" Neville asked. He toed another stone.

"What do you mean?"

"After the funerals, and after Hermione's holiday, then what? What are we supposed to do now?"

"Dunno, really. That's the point of a mental holiday. You sorta leave the rest for another day."

Neville nodded, shattered the stone at his feet with a bang and some smoke. "Suppose you and Hermione will get a place of your own, won't you? And Harry and Ginny?"

"Uh...well...I suppose." Ron honestly hadn't thought about it. But letting a place would take money, which meant finding a position somewhere now that the shop was gone. And living with Hermione...he'd done it for years, sort of. At Hogwarts. But this would be living with her, sleeping with her, officially. That thought didn't panic him as much as it once would have.

"Lupin's got Jackie, now, doesn't he? And what do I have? Nothing." Neville sighed, shot off a blast, and in the garden Ron heard a gnome squeal in pain.

"What are you on about?" Ron asked. He turned Neville so that his back was to the garden. "You've got us, mate."

Neville looked up at the evening sky. "No," he said quietly. "No, I don't. But you don't understand that, because you've never been alone. Not really alone. Harry understands, though." And Neville looked over Ron's shoulder. Ron turned and saw Harry in the doorway.

"You don't need to go," Harry told him. "Stay a while."

"Can't," Neville told him.

"Our birthdays," Harry said. "You'll come back for that? Come here? We can celebrate together."

Neville's eyes narrowed, and then he looked down the path as if longing to flee. "I'll come for your birthday. If I'm in town."

When he Apparated away Ron wasn't sure he'd ever see Neville again.

"Don't worry," Harry told him. "He'll be back."

Three nights later Ron went to Charlie's room. He'd debated with himself and tried to sleep in his own bed alone, but his body hummed with a want that could no longer be ignored. Need overcame the grief and guilt that had been dulled by the deluge of the previous week. They'd attended the last of the funerals, and Ron had said good-bye to Hagrid with one of Buckbeak's feathers and a loaf of soda bread, heavy on the rocks – just the way he liked it.

Tomorrow Hermione would leave for her parents for a much deserved holiday with her parents. The thought of her leaving made Ron anxious, though he couldn't say just why. He knew she would be safe enough now, and that she could probably handle any trouble that might go looking for her.

She was asleep when he closed the door behind himself. He could hear her deep, regular breaths. The night was warm, and her window was open, and the thin curtains played in the breeze. The moonlight

streamed down on top of her like a blue spotlight, and he stared at her chest rise and fall beneath the thin little top that had driven him to distraction more times than he could count. He loved her breasts, her tight little nipples, and the shallow valley between them as she lay on her back. She had one arm flung over her head, her hand lost in the wild tangle of her hair. Her other hand lay limp across her belly.

She woke when he took a step toward her, and her wand was instantly pointed at his heart. "Ron?" she asked, groggy and blinking.

"Yeah."

She lowered her wand and shoved the heels of her hands in her eyes. "What's wrong?"

"I miss you," he told her.

She held out her hand to him and her wand zoomed into it. "Oh, bloody hell!" she cursed, and flung it at the wall. When she saw the look in Ron's eyes she had second thoughts, and held out her hand again. The wand quivered and wiggled until it worked its way free. She cast a Contraception Charm on herself.

"That wasn't necessary." Ron crossed the room to her.

"Oh."

He knelt by the bed and sat back on his heels. "Lay back."

"What? Why? Are you all right, Ron? You look...odd."

"I think I'm good. I love you. Lay back."

She pursed her lips and complied without taking her eyes off him, and scooted a little to the side. "I could double the bed. There's enough room in here-"

He pointed his wand at her robes and whispered, "Delesquio." Then he made her knickers disappear, as well.

"You could've just asked me to take them off, you know," she snipped, less than pleased at losing the clothes. She rose up nude on one elbow.

"Lay back," he said once more.

She huffed and dropped down to the pillow, and jumped a little when he cupped her knee in his hand. "Are you all right?"

He gave her a small smile that he truly felt down to his toes. "I will be."

And then his seduction began. He wanted to touch her - not like he had before, searching and discovering - but to enjoy her. He wanted to please her. His fingers tickled and smoothed up her leg to the soft, smooth inside of her thigh. Her thighs seemed to glow in the moonlight. They parted for him, and he took his time teasing her into ragged breathes. He watched her as he drove her closer to home, enjoyed the small mewling and catches in her gasps. Her eyes screwed shut, her hands fisted in the blankets below her. Sweat beaded on her chest, her trembling legs, and Ron wasn't close enough. He needed to be inside her. He needed to merge with her.

"You're not done," she warned.

He crawled on to the bed, between her legs, and she watched him with a hungry grin. She brought her knees up and open like a butterfly. Immediately Ron's strategy changed course, and instead of burying himself inside her, he dived in face first.

He didn't know what he was doing exactly, more of what he'd done before, really, but now with deep kisses instead of firm caresses. The smell of her was amazing, her taste had him pressing his pelvis into the edge of the mattress. She actually screamed when he sucked her inside his mouth; a sound that rolled out of the very depths of her body. Her nails scraped his scalp. She whimpered and bucked beneath him.

He came against the end of the bed.

His strangled cry had her peering breathless down at him, and she wore a look of absolute adoration. He knew that look. He had become Viktor Krum, Harry Potter, Miguel Amoro, Dumbledore's journals, and the entire contents of the Hogwarts' library all rolled into one in her eyes. His whole being convulsed.

Ron looked back down at what he was doing, grinned, and doubled his efforts. He could tell she was trying to hold out, but he had her in ecstasy before he'd completely come down from his own.

He slept that night with her curled tightly against him, and despite the heat he slept better than he had in recent memory. That night, at least, with their friends buried and their family safe, snuggled together, his demons were kept at bay.

It was two weeks later that Ron heaped another spoonful of eggs on to his plate, and added a couple more slices of toast. Harry watched him, his own plate mostly untouched.

"Not hungry?" Ron asked. He'd woken that morning to the bright, yellow, summer sun feeling as if he hadn't eaten in a year. His appetite had come back with a vengeance, and each day it sought to reestablish its importance in Ron's priorities.

"Reckon not," Harry said. He glanced over his shoulder, and then back down at his plate.

"You sick?" Ron asked, now a little concerned. Harry had made a quick recovery since the final battle, but as the healers had pointed out just the previous day, his magical well was still delicate, and Ginny still had his wand.

Ron, on the other hand, had made a full recovery - minus one sorely missed Smisurato ability, and a withered thigh that the healers said would keep him limping for the rest of his life. Ron hardly noticed that.

"Just not sleeping, I guess," Harry said.

"You might try actually closing your eyes at night," Ron quipped, and flashed him a pointed look. "Ginny's looking tired, too, you know."

"She had another nightmare," Harry told him, and Ron swallowed his grin.

"Oh." They'd all continued to have their share of nightmares, but Ginny seemed to be suffering with them the most. She'd been given some sleeping draughts by one of the healers at St. Mungo's and Ron wondered if she'd already run out.

"But, Hermione, right?" Harry said, changing the subject. "Bet you can't wait to see her. I can't wait to see her."

"Yeah," Ron said.

"I kinda thought you'd go with her. You know, meet the parents..."

Ron swallowed down another bite of eggs. "I've met her parents. You know that."

Harry rolled his eyes, and then glanced over his shoulder again. Was there something out the living room window? Out in the garden. "Is Ginny out there?"

"Oh. Yeah." Harry made another attempt at his bacon.

"Everything all right? Are the nightmares that bad? Have you talked to Lupin about them?"

Harry looked up, and Ron got the impression Harry hadn't heard him. "I've decided," Harry told him. "Today's the day."

"Really?" Ron asked. "Wow. Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

"You look miserable."

Harry gave him a frustrated look. "I'm not miserable. I'm...concentrating."

"You're nervous!" Ron teased, and then laughed with Harry's cheeks flushed dark pink. "You really are nervous! But, you're The Harry Potter! You're the brave bloke who defeated Voldemort, the courageous chap who saved the wizarding world!" The Daily Prophet had said that and a whole lot more about Harry, as well as their own never-wavering confidence in both him and his role as The Chosen One.

Harry rolled his eyes and dismissed Ron with a scowl. "I had help with that. Keep your voice down."

"Well. I'm not helping you with this," Ron said. "Defeat the most powerful evil wizard of all time – yes, this - no."

Harry's eyes narrowed on him. He went very still. "You're not telling me not to do it, are you?"

"I'm telling you I'm a coward," Ron said.

"Hardly." Ginny had just stepped in the kitchen door, hands and knees covered in dirt, her pink face glistening. "No one in this family is a coward. Idiot, maybe. Silly git, perhaps. But not a coward." She leaned over Harry, who tilted his head back, and she kissed him soundly on the mouth. "I'm going to shower before people start arriving."

"Shower. Right," said Harry, clearly still thinking about that kiss. He got up and began to follow her up the stairs. Ron gave Ginny a roll of the eyes and a smirk, and she shrugged.

"Oi!" Fred and George rushed leading a girl each by the hand. The girls were twins judging from their identical height, blond, wavy hair, heart-shaped faces, and overly long, straight noses. One wore blue, the other green. "Missy and Julie," Fred said, by way of introduction. Then the four of them trampled up the stairs.

Just as they disappeared, Ron's mother breezed in the door, red-faced and sweaty from working in the garden. "Was that your brothers I saw sneaking in here?" she demanded, as she tossed her wide-brimmed straw hat on the counter top. "Who else would it be?"

Skiving off helping in the garden!" She poured herself a glass of water from the pewter pitcher, and turned to lean against the cabinets. She considered Ron. "Going to loaf all day in your pajamas, are you?"

"I might," Ron said airily, and chomped on another piece of toast.

She studied him for a moment, narrowed her eyes. "Remus sent an owl this morning. He and Jack should be here before long."

It had been three days since Ron had seen Jack, and Ron was itching to hold him again. Now that the baby was sitting up on his own and chattering happily, he was a lot more fun to play with. Hide and seek with his fuzzy toy wand was endlessly entertaining – at least for Ron.

His mum snorted. "You're just like your father, you know that? He got that same look on his face every time he held one of you. Or played with your feet. Or burped you. That man was a natural father – just like you."

"God father," Ron corrected her.

"Yes, well, I can't see how it'll take much time," she said, and set her glass down on the counter.

"I'm eighteen, mum."

"Yes, dear, I'm aware. I also know what I heard just before Hermione left for her parents." This she said pointedly. "I know the score, Ron. I may just be a mother in your eyes, but I was once young and in love."

"Oh, Mum! Not now, all right? It's Harry's birthday."

"Happy Birthday!" It was Bill in the doorway, with Fleur just beside him. They both held brightly wrapped presents and something that smelled like freshly baked pumpkin cake. "Oh, I thought he was in here," Bill said, and stepped in to lighten his load. He embraced his mother. Then she turned to Fleur with a warm hug, and kisses to both cheeks.

"And how goes it, my littlest brother?"

"Fine," Ron said.

"Nicely recovered, I see." Bill sat next to him, and leaned in to ask, "How's Harry?"

"Oh, he's fine. The healers told Ginny she could give him his wand back at the end of the week. He's been doing everything the Muggle way."

"Enough of that," said their mum. She sat down opposite them, and motioned for Fleur to join her. "Bill, I need you to talk some sense in to your brother. He's gotten too old to listen to his dear ol' mum."

Bill gave Ron an appraising look. "What have you done now?"

"Nothing," Ron insisted.

"It's not what he's done," she said. "It's what he plans to do."

"What are you on about?" Ron asked. "I'm not doing anything."

Just then there was a knock at the door, and through the small, curtained window Ron saw Lupin's form. He took the opportunity to jump up from the table.

"Come in!" Ron greeted his friend.

Lupin said a general hello to the room and handed Jack over. Ron willingly took the baby, kissed his checkered forehead. Jack laughed. So did Ron.

"Do you see that?" Ron's mum said, and she gestured to Ron. "Now, who does that remind you of?"

"Uh..." Bill didn't seem to know what she was getting at. "Well, he sorta looks like Tonks, what with the pink hair and happy smile-"

"Not the baby, Bill. Honestly! Pay attention. I'm talking about your brother. You see how he holds young Jack, there?"

The all turned and looked at Ron. Lupin gave him a friendly smile as he sat at the table. He still seemed tired – not that Ron had never really known him to not look tired – but his wounds were healing, thanks to the time at St. Mungo's. Ron though he might suggest he take Jackie over-night, though, to give him some more time to catch up on sleep.

"He looks like your father!" Ron's mum cried in exasperation. "When he was holding you, or Percy, or even Ron. Look at his eyes!"

Bill stared at his mother. "Are you feeling all right?"

"He thinks he's ready to start a family!" she exclaimed and jumped up from the table. "He thinks he's ready for fatherhood!"

Again all eyes turned to Ron, who gaped at his mother. "Er...Mum? What are you on about?"

From her sweater pocket Ron's mum pulled a small black ball, about the size of a Rememberall. It had glowing with a red window on the bottom. "You think your mum doesn't understand what's going through your head? I've got a Magic 8 Ball!"

Bill immediately snatched it up. "Where'd you get one of these?" And then he peered at the window with the light. "'Son to propose.' Is this a joke?"

"Never you mind," she said, taking it back. "That's all it's said since late last night, and no matter what question I ask it, that's the answer."

"Zis is not a yes or no question, non?" Fleur said.

"No," Bill said, still excited, and staring at the ball in his mother's hand. "This is a British Magic 8 Ball – the Americans are too limited in their approach."

"It's not me," Ron said.

"Well, it's either you, or Fred and George," she said, thrusting the ball at him.

"What about Fred and George?" George asked, as they trampled down the stairs in a herd of blond and red. Ron's mum stared. Then she discreetly put her ball away.

"You've got lady friends!" Bill said, and then stood and introduced himself to the girls. Ron thought they looked a bit older than his brothers, but he knew that wouldn't bother Fred and George. Both sisters had ample bosoms and backsides, and identical dimples puckering their chins.

Lupin touched Ron's shoulder, and he nodded out the kitchen door. They went out into the already warm morning, and walked down the path a little, and then out into the grass. It was dry and crisp against Ron's bare feet.

"You would make a good father," Lupin said, and he laid a hand on his son's head. "If you need to be one."

"Er...thanks." It was a great compliment, but an awkward one to accept.

"Do you need to be one, Ron? Are you going to be one? Has something happened? Is Hermione...?"

"No!" Ron insisted. At least he didn't think so. "The ball wasn't talking about me."

Lupin stared off into his own quiet thoughts for a moment, and smiled. "Often when so much happens to us, we forget to take a step back every now and then and put things back into perspective. You've done a lot of growing up in the last seven years. A tremendous amount. More than a wizard twice your age might. More than many men ever do." Lupin pushed his hands into his pockets, and he looked off toward the orchard and the bottomless baskets that had

served as the Weasleys' Quidditch hoops ever since Bill got his first broom.

"But it's important now that there's time to take a breath, that you do take that step back. Enjoy being eighteen, Ron, because it'll be gone in the blink of an eye. You're not a child anymore, but you are still young. Be young. Allow yourself that gift. Enjoy it."

There was a deafening crack, and Ron turned to see Hermione appear just outside of the magical boundary of the Burrow. She waved excitedly, and hurried toward them. Her hair was fluffy and flying in the warm breeze, her skin tanned a rich gold, her smile a mile wide. Ron had missed her terribly while she was gone, but in seeing her now he realized he'd missed her even more than he'd imagined. He quickly handed Jack off to his father, and opened his arms. She ran into them. Their lips met hungrily at first, and they squeezed each other tightly. Then he felt her smile against his mouth, and her kisses turned playful. She nipped at his lips, at his tongue before pulling away.

"Hello," she said smiling at Lupin.

He gave her an embarrassed smile back.

Then she looked deep into Ron's eyes. "A kiss of the seventh Order, I think."

"That's what I was going for."

There was another crack, and Neville appeared with a girl on his sleeve. A very familiar girl.

"Ron? That's never...is that your friend?" Hermione asked. "What was her name?"

"Gretta," Ron said, stunned. "Gretta Sweet."

"Then I'm not seeing things," Hermione said.

"Hiya," Neville said. He glared down at the ground. "You know Greta? I thought I'd bring her...no one said no dates."

"Hello, Greta," Hermione said happily. "And of course you're welcome!"

Just then the door slammed open and it was as if the kitchen exploded, and people spilled out. Fred, George and Bill ran toward the orchard, each with a broom in hand, followed quickly by Ginny with her hair still wet, and Harry.

"Oi! Neville! Just in time!" Harry called. "Care for a spot of Quidditch? We're going to have a game before dinner!"

"Come on, Neville!" Ginny yelled. "You're on my team!"

Ron's mum followed the twins' twins out with a nervous expression on her face. They were all heading for orchard.

Hermione turned back to Ron, still smiling. "I missed you."

He kissed her again, brushed his bottom lip across hers. "I'll go in and get dad's spare broom for you."

"Oh, that's all right," she said. "I don't think I'll play."

"Come on," he urged. "We're young. Let's be young a while longer."

Her expression turned quizzical.

It took him no time at all to race up to his room and grab his broom. On the next landing down he froze. His parents' door looked just the same as it had all his life, and yet, he had trouble bringing himself to open it. He held his breath as the door swung, and he peered in to the dim room. Bed, drawers, lumpy flowered chair; she hadn't changed a thing since his father's death. His dad's spare broom hung on its pegs by the closet, just as it always had. It wasn't very fast anymore, but its handle was comfortable – smooth and glossy from years of use.

He heard laughter, and he went to the window. He could see them through the trees full with leaves and unripe apples, flying and laughing and taunting each other. Ginny had the Quaffle, then George, then Fleur. There was Harry with a Beater's bat, smiling as wide as Ron had ever seen him. He looked younger, somehow. So did Neville, when he flew by Gretta and she gave a wink. The scowl almost left his face. So, the harshness of war could be undone, Ron realized. Or, he decided, at least softened a bit around the edges. Pain could be eased. Grief could scar over. Life went on.

Ron raced down to join them, but by the time he reached the orchard they'd all landed. There was tension; the light mood was gone. Something had happened. Ron stepped up beside his mother to ask what, but she already had tears rolling down her round cheeks. Her eyes were full of her daughter, and the wizard who knelt in front of her.

"...always have," Harry said. "It took a while to understand it, it took Loving someone else to believe it, but it's true. I love you. I want to spend the rest of my life making you happy, helping you do whatever it is that you want to do, and be who ever you want to be. And I hope, Ginny - you have no idea how I hope - that you want to be my wife." He pulled out a small box, and then took her wrist and placed it delicately in her palm. "The only thing I want to do is love you, Ginny Weasley, and the only thing I want to be is your husband. Will you, Ginny? Will you be my family? Will you marry me?"

She was very still in front of him, deceptively so. Ron saw her hands shake as she opened the box. Her eyes grew wide, tears fell. And then she was laughing while she cried, and she nodded as she wiped her nose on the back of her hand. Everyone cheered, joined in with more laughter and tears. Harry helped her take the ring out and he slipped it on her slim finger. She laughed with real joy, as he lifted her, spun her around, hugged her close. He kissed her, and for some odd reason Ron didn't feel the need to look away.

"My son proposed," Ron's mum said breathlessly. And then her voice caught in a sob.

"It's a good thing," Ron told her.

"Oh, I know that," she said, and swatted at him. Then she turned and looked hard at him, and her tears were forgotten. "Are you next? Tell me, Ron. My heart can't take this kind of anticipation!"

"No, Mum," he said, and rolled his eyes.

"Ronald Weasley, you look at me. Tell me the truth."

"I am!" he insisted.

"You're not going to propose?"

"No," he said, and slammed his fists into his pockets. It wasn't any of her business either way!

"Look at me when you say that, Ron!"

He glared at her. "No, Mum! I'm not going to propose to Hermione!"

"Well, then," she said.

They both turned, and realized that everyone in the orchard was now looking at them. Including Hermione.

"Oh, no," he wheezed, as the panic flooded through him. But, then she smiled at him, and suddenly everything was all right again.

The twins tried to start the Quidditch game up again, but it was a lost cause. Everyone headed back to the house to celebrate with bramble wine and cake. Hermione linked arms with Ron as they walked back.

"You're not Harry," she whispered to him, "and I'm not Ginny. Their time isn't our time. I rather like being us. And, you're right. We are still young..."

They walked in step together without even having to adjust their stride. All those years of walking the halls of Hogwarts, he supposed. "You think it would've been different for them if they had been Fated? I can't really see how."

"Maybe that's why they weren't...and why we were," she said. "I can't imagine not being Fated to you."

"You weren't for a while there."

"It feels like forever ago – like a dream." They walked in silence for a hundred heartbeats. "Ron...when do you think it'll be our time?"

"Our time for what?" he asked, and she rolled her eyes. "Oooh. You mean to get married? 'Dunno, really. Whenever you get around to asking, I reckon."

"Me?" She looked horrified at the thought.

"Well, sure! Why should the bloke have all the pressure?"

"By bloke you mean yourself."

"Well, I am the bloke in this scenario, yes."

"Not if I'm proposing," she muttered. "Ron it's the boy who's supposed to ask the girl."

"Says who?" Ron asked. "And why?"

"Well..." She was really thinking, which Ron found both amusing and a little disconcerting. "Because he has to give her a ring."

"That's silly. The bloke should get an engagement ring, too," Ron told her. "And I expect bended knee. And you'd better ask my mother's permission before you do anything. I expect her to walk me down the aisle."

She glared at him from the corner of her eye. "So, you're telling me our time isn't any time soon."

Ron just grinned. He wasn't sure if the Fates had known the true scope of what they'd done when they'd linked him and Hermione together. But Ron was so very glad that they had.

"Did I say that?" he quipped lightly. Her frustration grew and he had to chuckle to himself. He could do this all day. "You know, Hermione, I don't think those words ever came out of my mouth..."

End of chapter 23

End of Part IV

End of False Fates